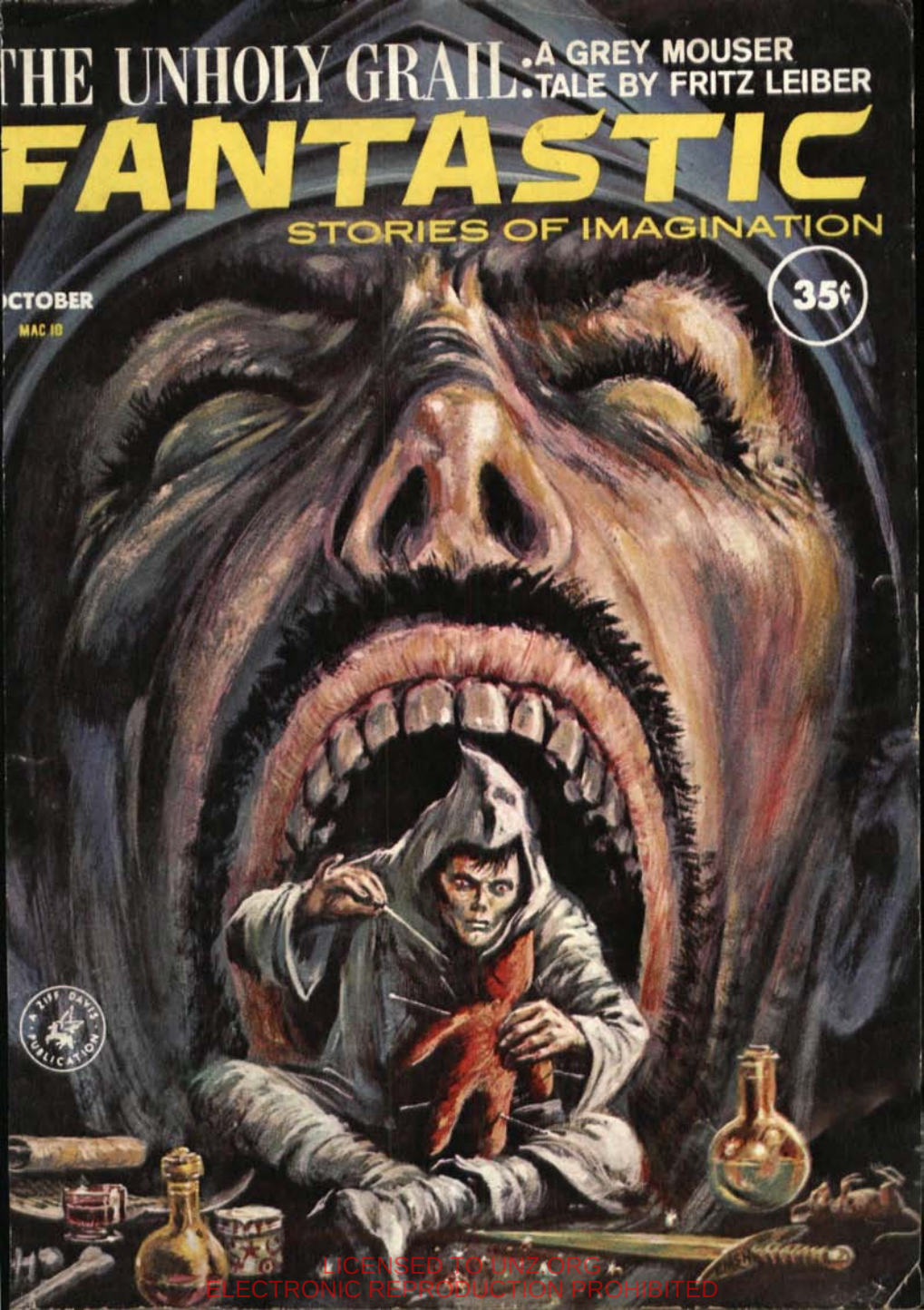

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FANTASTIC
STORIES OF IMAGINATION

OCTOBER 1962
Volume 11 Number 10

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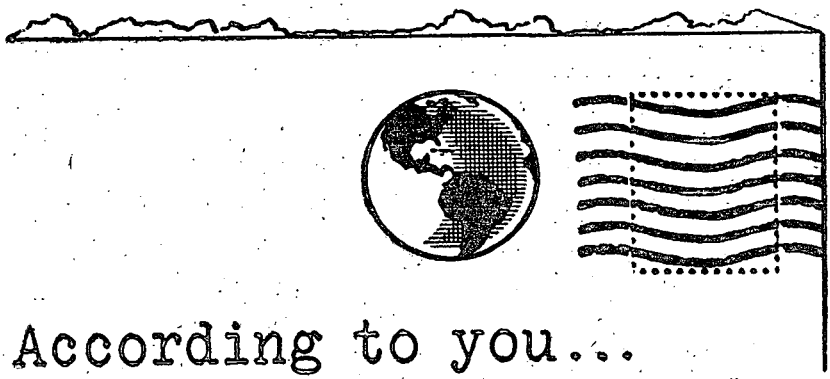

According to you...

Dear Editor:

Since Poul Anderson is one of the better sf authors, and FANTASTIC one of the better sf magazines, it grieves me to say that I think "Shield" was a failure. Looking back over recent Z-D serials ("Second Ending;" "The Man Who Had No Brains;" "Maganthropus") I can say that this one is far inferior to them. One fault was its lack of description of the world in which Koskinen was fighting for his life; hence Marcus' tyranny seemed a little unreal. Also, if Vivienne was going to walk out on him in the end, what was she doing in the story in the first place? I prefer individual flight (*Null-A*, i.e.) to two people getting in each other's way. Finally, "Shield" was stilted in dialogue and Koskinen was never really likable as a hero. As an sf novel, this was barely average; as a serial for your magazine, way below your standards, (look what came before it: "Maganthropus." Any comparison there?).

Unfortunately, "Maganthropus" was followed by "Joyleg," which was far worse than "Shield." With all respects to Messrs. Davidson and Moore, this was one of the sorriest stories I have ever read. I can not believe that anyone could wade through writing three drafts (or perhaps even more) of such a dull conclusion as this novel had. At *least* Weathernox could have been made bearable, (in fact, the heroine herself was a little sticky). This is not to say that I hate all heroes; just dull ones.

Chuck Cunningham
822 Cherokee Rd. NE
Gainesville, Ga.

● *How about dopey villains?*

(*Continued on page 125*)

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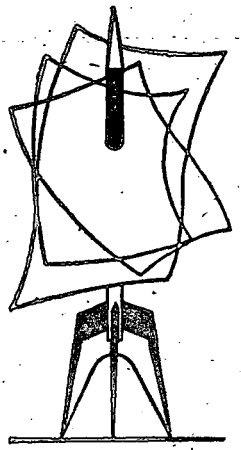

EVERY child knows that the pull of the moon's gravity causes earth's oceanic tides. Now a respected geologist has gone one self-admittedly "startling" step further and put forth the only slightly-fantastic theory that lunar gravity also causes "tides" in the planet's crust and is thereby responsible for the creation of our mountains.

Dr. Ray Woodriff presented his paper—Do the Mountains of Earth Come From the Moon?—at the last annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. In brief, he pointed out that the rise and fall of the earth's surface, as the moon passes, eventually falls into a pattern of "wrinkles" which ultimately become mountains.

To account for the key action—the movement of rock, the geologist postulates that ions—electrified bits of molecules which make up crystals, which in turn are the essential ingredient of earth rocks—change their position within the crystals as the moon's gravity alternately pulls and pushes the crust.

Woodriff writes: "As the moon passes over the crust of the earth, the solid rock of the crust bulges outward, placing the upper surface under relative tension. Holes open between crystals and within crystals. Ions diffuse into these holes.

"As the crest of the lunar tide passes, the upper surface of the earth's crust is released from tension and goes into compression. Ions that shifted in the meantime are trapped in their new locations, thus thinning and broadening the crust of the earth infinitesimally."

As the moon pulls elsewhere on the planet, new holes "open" and the trapped ions diffuse into them. Each time the cycle is completed the earth's surface thins a bit, and at weak points the crust "wrinkles, folds and slips . . . when these grow sufficiently pronounced in the course of millions of years we recognize them as mountains."

Woodriff thinks his theory might also explain the location of the deep sea trenches alongside earthquake-prone island arcs.

The theory is just that so far—a fascinating hypothesis. But wouldn't it be odd if a range of mountains such as the magnificent peaks in Uganda, in Africa, named by ancient Ptolemy as the "Mountains of the Moon," really *were*?—N. L.

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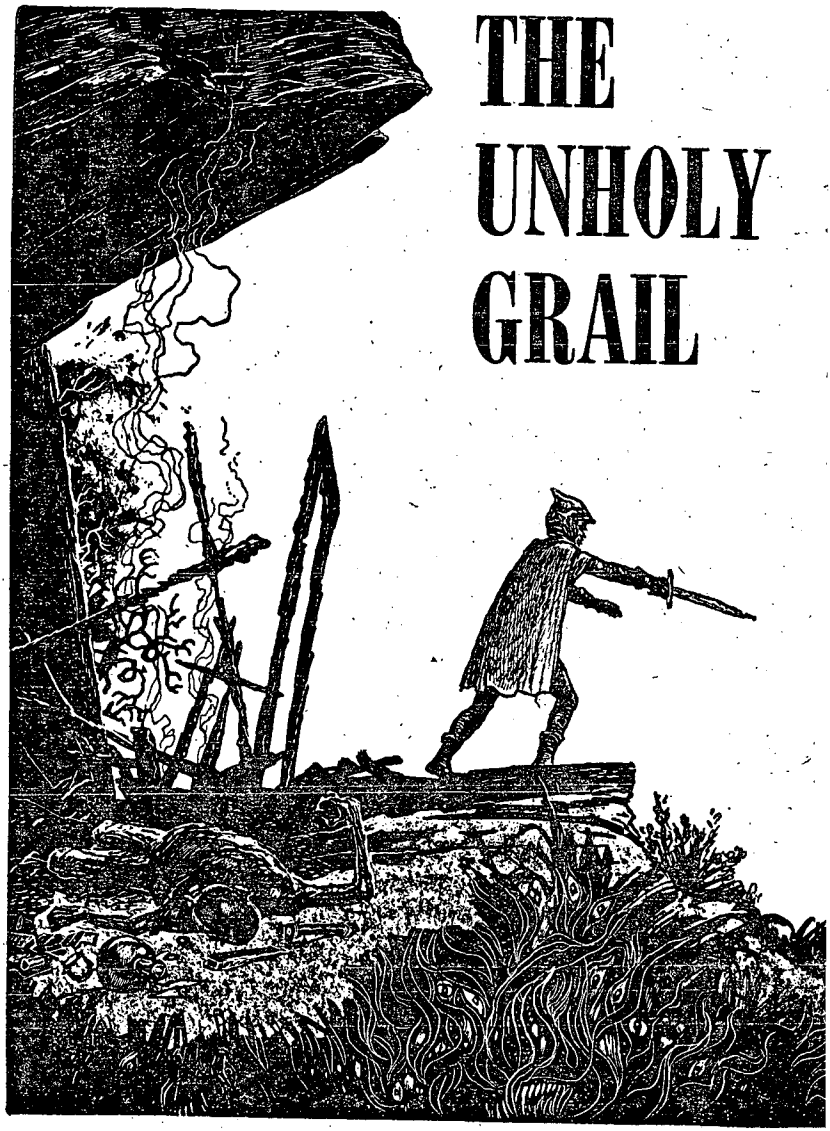
By FRITZ LEIBER

THE UNHOLY GRAIL



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"How did he get that way?" is a question asked about all heroes, villains . . . and hero-villains. So, depending chiefly on the records of Srith of the Scrolls, turn back to the day when the Gray Mouser was only Mouse, a despised and untested apprentice of a hedge-wizard.

THREE things warned the wizard's apprentice that something was wrong: first the deep-trodden prints of iron-shod hooves along the forest path—he sensed them through his boots before stooping to feel them out in the dark; next, the eerie drone of a bee unnaturally abroad by night; and finally, a faint aromatic odor of burning. Mouse raced ahead, dodging tree-trunks and skipping over twisted roots by memory and by a bat's feeling for rebounding whispers of sound. Gray leggings, tunic, peaked hood and streaming cloak made the slight youth, skinny with asceticism, seem like a rushing shadow.

The exaltation Mouse had felt at the successful completion of his long quest and his triumphal return to his sorcerous master Glavas Rho, now vanished from his mind and gave way to a fear he hardly dared put into thoughts. Harm to the great wizard, whose mere apprentice he was?—"My Gray Mouse, still

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midway in his allegiance between white magic and black," Glavas Rho had once put it—no, it was unthinkable that that great figure of wisdom and spiritual might should come to harm. The great magician . . . (There was something hysterical about the way Mouse insisted on that "great," for to the world Glavas Rho was but a hedge-wizard, no better than a Mingol necromancer with his second-sighted spotted dog or a conjurer beggar of Quarmall) . . . the great magician and his dwelling were alike protected by strong enchantments no impious outsider could breach—not even (the heart of Mouse skipped a beat) the lord paramount of these forests, Duke Janarrl, who hated all magic, but white worse than black.

And yet the smell of burning was stronger now and Glavas Rho's low cottage was built of resinous wood.

THERE also vanished from Mouse's mind the vision of a girl's face, perpetually frightened yet sweet—that of Duke Janarrl's daughter Ivrian, who came secretly to study under Glavas Rho, figuratively sipping the milk of his white wisdom side by side with Mouse. Indeed, they had privately come to call each other Mouse and Misling, while under his tunic Mouse carried a plain green glove he had teased from Ivrian when he set forth on his quest, as if he were her armored and beweaponed knight and not a swordless wizardling.

By the time Mouse reached the hilltop clearing he was breathing hard, not from exertion.

There the gathering light showed him at a glance the hoof-hacked garden of magic herbs, the overturned straw beehive, the great flare of soot sweeping up the smooth surface of the vast granite boulder that sheltered the wizard's tiny house.

But even without the dawn light he would have seen the fire-shrunken beams and fire-gnawed posts a-creep with red ember-worms and the wraithlike green flame where some stubborn sorcerous ointment still burned. He would have smelt the confusion of precious odors of burnt drugs and balms and the horribly appetizing kitchen-odor of burnt flesh.

His whole lean body winced. Then, like a hound getting the scent, he darted forward.

The wizard lay just inside the buckled door. And he had fared as his house. The beams of his body bared and blackened. The priceless juices and subtle substances boiled, burnt, destroyed forever or streamed upward to some cold hell beyond the moon.

From all around came very faintly a low sad hum, as the unhoused bees mourned.

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Memories fled horrorstricken through Mouse's mind: these shriveled lips softly chanting incantations, those charred fingers pointing at the stars or stroking a small woodland animal.

TREMBLING, Mouse drew forth from the leather pouch at his belt a flat green stone, engraved on the one side with deep-cut alien hieroglyphs, on the other with an armored, many-jointed monster, like a giant ant, that trod among tiny fleeing human figures. That stone had been the object of the quest on which Glavas Rho had sent him. For sake of it, he had rafted across the Lakes of Pleea, tramped the foothills of the Mountains of Hunger, hidden from a raiding party of red-bearded pirates, tricked lumpish peasant-fishermen, flattered and flirted with an elderly odorous witch, robbed a tribal shrine, and eluded hounds set on his trail. His winning the green stone without shedding blood meant that he had advanced another grade in his apprenticeship. Now he gazed dully at its ancient surface and then, his trembling controlled, laid it carefully on his master's blackened palm. As he stooped he realized that the soles of his feet were painfully hot, his boots smoking a little at the edges, yet he did not hurry his steps as he moved away.

It was lighter now and he noticed little things, such as the anthill by the threshold. The master had studied the black-armored creatures as intently as he had their cousin bees. Now it was deeply dented by a great heel mark showing a semi-circle of pits made by spikes—yet something was moving. Peering closely he saw a tiny heat-maimed warrior struggling over the sand-grains. He remembered the monster on the green stone and shrugged at a thought that led nowhere.

He crossed the clearing through the mourning bees to where pale light showed between the tree trunks and soon was standing, hand resting on a gnarly bole, at a point where the hillside sloped sharply away. In the wooded valley below was a serpent of mist, indicating the course of the stream that wound through it. The air was heavy with the dissipating smoke of darkness. The horizon was edged to the right with red from the coming sun. Beyond it, Mouse knew, lay more forest and then the interminable grain fields and marshes of Lankhmar and beyond even those the ancient world-center of Lankhmar city, which Mouse had never seen, yet whose overlord ruled in theory even this far.

But near at hand, outlined by the sunrise red, was a bundle of jagged-topped towers—the

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stronghold of Duke Janarrl. A wary animation came into Mouse's masklike face. He thought of the spiked heelmark, the hacked turf, the trail of hoofmarks leading down this slope. Everything pointed to the wizard-hating Janarrl as the author of the atrocity behind him, except that, still revering his master's skills as matchless, Mouse did not understand how the Duke had broken through the enchantments, strong enough to dizzy the keenest woodsman, which had protected Glavas Rho's abode for many a year.

He bowed his head . . . and saw, lying lightly on the springing grassblades, a plain green glove. He snatched it up and digging in his tunic drew forth another glove, darkly mottled and streakily bleached by sweat, and held them side by side. They were mates.

HIS lips writhed back from his teeth and his gaze went again to the distant stronghold. Then he unseated a thick round of scraggy bark from the tree-trunk he'd been touching and delved shoulder-deep in the black cavity revealed. As he did these things with a slow tense automatism, the words came back to him of a reading Glavas Rho had smilingly given him over a meal of milkless gruel.

"Mouse," the mage had said, firelight dancing on his short white beard, "when you stare your eyes like that and flare your nostrils, you are too much like a cat for me to credit you will ever be a sheepdog of the truth. You are a middling dutiful scholar, but secretly you favor swords over wands. You are more tempted by the hot lips of black magic than the chaste slim fingers of white, no matter to how pretty a misling the latter belong—no, do not deny it! You are more drawn to the beguiling sinuosities of the lefthand path than the short steep road of the right. I fear me you will never be mouse in the end but mouser. And never white but gray—oh well, that's better than black. Now wash up these bowls and go breathe an hour on the newborn agueplant, for 'tiz a chill night, and remember to talk kindly to the thorn-bush."

The remembered words grew faint, but did not fade, as Mouse drew from the hole a leather belt furred green with mold and dangling from it a moldy scabbard. From the latter he drew, seizing it by the thong-wrapped grip, a tapering bronze sword showing more verdigris than metal. His eyes grew wide, but pin-point-pupiled, and his face yet more masklike, as he held the pale-green, brown-edged blade against the red hump of the rising sun.

From across the valley came faintly the high, clear, ringing

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note of a hunting horn, calling men to the chase.

Abruptly Mouse strode off down the slope, cutting over to the trail of the hooves, moving with long hasty strides and a little stiff-leggedly, as if drunk, and buckling around his waist as he went the mold-furred sword-belt.

* * *

A DARK four-footed shape rushed across the sun-specked forest glade, bearing down the underbrush with its broad low chest and trampling it with its narrow cloven hooves. From behind sounded the notes of a horn and the excited shouts of men. At the far edge of the glade, the boar turned. Breath whistled through its nostrils and it swayed. Then its half-glazed little eyes fixed on the figure of a man on horseback. It turned toward him and some trick of the sunlight made its pelt grow blacker. Then it charged. But before the terrible up-turning tusks could find flesh to slash, a heavy-bladed spear bent like a bow against the knob of its shoulder and it went crashing over half backwards, its blood spattering the greenery.

Huntsmen clad in brown and green appeared in the glade, some surrounding the fallen boar with a wall of spear point, others hurrying up to the man on the horse. He was clad in rich garments of yellow and brown. He laughed, tossed one of his huntsmen the bloodied spear and accepted a silver-worked leather wine flask from another.

A second rider appeared in the glade and the Duke's small yellow eyes clouded under the tangled brows. He drank deep and wiped his lips with the back of his sleeve. The huntsmen were warily closing their spear-wall on the boar, which lay rigid but with head lifted a finger's breadth off the turf, its only movements the darting of its gaze from side to side and the pulse of bright blood from its shoulder. The spear-wall was about to close when Janarrl waved the huntsmen to a halt.

"Ivrian!" he called harshly to the newcomer. "You had two chances at the beast, but you flinched. Your cursed dead mother would already have sliced thin and tasted the beast's raw heart."

His daughter stared at him miserably. She was dressed as the huntsmen and rode astride with a sword at her side and a spear in her hand, but it only made her seem more the thin-faced, spindle-armed girl.

"You are a milksop, a wizard-loving coward," Janarrl continued. "Your abominable mother would have faced the boar a-foot and laughed when its blood gushed in her face. Look here, this boar is scotched. It cannot harm you. Drive your spear into it now! I command you!"

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THE huntsmen broke their spear-wall and drew back to either side, making a path between the boar and the girl. They sniggered openly at her and the Duke smiled at them approvingly. The girl hesitated, sucking at her underlip, staring with fear and fascination too at the beast which eyed her, head still just a-lift.

"Drive in your spear!" Janarrl repeated, sucking quickly at the flask. "Do so, or I will whip you here and now."

Then she touched her heels to the horse's flanks and cantered down the glade, her body bent low, the spear trained at its target. But at the last instant its point swerved aside and gouged the dirt. The boar had not moved. The huntsmen laughed raucously.

Janarrl's wide face reddened with anger as he stepped his horse over to the girl's. His hand whipped out suddenly and trapped her wrist, tightened on it. "I'll blood you!" he roared. "Your damned mother could cut men's throats and not change color. I'll see you flesh your spear in that carcass, or I'll make you dance, here and now, as I did last night, when you told me the wizard's spells and the place of his den."

He leaned closer and his voice sank to a whisper. "Know, chit, that I've long suspected that your mother, fierce as she could be, was—perhaps ensorcled against her will—a wizard-lover like yourself . . . and you the whelp of that burnt charmer."

Her eyes widened and she started to pull away from him, but he drew her closer. "Have no fear, chit; I'll work the taint out of your flesh one way or another. For a beginning, prick me that boar!"

She did not move. Her face was a cream-colored mask of fear. He raised his hand. But at that moment there was an interruption.

A figure appeared at the edge of the glade at the point where the boar had turned to make its last charge. It was that of a slim youth, dressed all in gray. Like one drugged or in a trance, he walked straight toward Janarrl. The three huntsmen who had been attending the Duke drew swords and moved leisurely toward him.

The youth's face was white and tensed, his forehead beaded with sweat under the gray hood half thrown back. Jaw muscles made ivory knobs. His eyes, fixed on the Duke, squinted as if they looked at the blinding sun.

His lips parted wide, showing his teeth. "Slayer of Glavas Rho! Wizard-killer!"

THEN his bronze sword was out of its moldy scabbard. Two of the huntsmen moved in

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his way, one of them crying, "Beware poison!" at the green of the newcomer's blade. The youth aimed a terrific blow at him, handling his sword as if it were a sledge. The huntsman parried it with ease, so that it whistled over his head, and the youth almost fell with the force of his own blow. The huntsman stepped forward and with a snappy stroke rapped the youth's sword near the hilt to disarm him, and the fight was done before begun—almost. For the glazed look left the youth's eyes and his features twitched like those of a cat and, recovering his grip on the sword, he lunged forward with a twisting motion at the wrist that captured the huntsman's blade in his own, whipping it out of his hand, and continued the lunge straight toward the heart of the second huntsman, who escaped only by collapsing backward to the turf.

Janarrl leaned forward tensely in his saddle, muttering, "The whelp has fangs," but at that instant the third huntsman, who had circled past, struck the youth with the sword-hilt on the back of his neck. The youth dropped his sword, swayed and started to fall, but the first huntsman grabbed him by the neck of his tunic and hurled him towards his companions. They received him in their own jocular fashion with cuffs and slaps, slashing his head and ribs with sheathed daggers, eventually letting him fall to the ground, kicking him, worrying him like a pack of hounds.

Janarrl sat motionless, watching his daughter. He had not missed her frightened start of recognition when the youth appeared. Now he saw her lean forward, lips twitching. Twice she started to speak. Her horse moved uneasily and whinnied. Finally she hung her head and cowered back while low retching sobs came from her throat. Then Janarrl gave a satisfied grunt and called out, "Enough for the present! Bring him here!"

Two huntsmen dragged between them the half-fainting youth clad now in red-spattered gray.

"Coward," said the Duke. "This sport will not kill you. They were only gentling you in preparation for other sports. But I forget you are a pawky wizardling, an effeminate creature who babbles spells in the dark and curses behind the back, a craven who fondles animals and would make the forests mawkish places. Faught! My teeth are on edge. And yet you sought to corrupt my daughter and—Hearken to me, wizardling, I say!" And leaning low from his saddle he caught the youth's sagging head by the hair, tangling in his fingers. The youth's eyes rolled wildly and he gave a convulsive

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jerk that took the huntsmen by surprise and almost tumbled Janarrl out of the saddle.

Just then there was an ominous crackling of underbrush and the rapid thud of hooves. Someone cried, "Have a care, master! Oh Gods, guard the Duke!"

The wounded boar had lurched to its feet and was charging the group by Janarrl's horse.

The huntsmen scattered back, snatching for their weapons.

Janarrl's horse shied, further overbalancing its rider. The boar thundered past, like red-smeared midnight. Janarrl almost fell atop it. The boar swung sharply around for a return charge, evading three thrown spears that thudded into the earth just beside it. Janarrl tried to stand, but one of his feet was snagged in a stirrup and his horse, jerking clear, tumbled him again.

The boar came on, but other hooves were thudding now. Another horse swept past Janarrl and a firmly-held spear entered near the boar's shoulder and buried itself deep. The black beast, jarred backward, slashed once at the spear with its tusk, fell heavily on its side and was still.

Then Ivrian let go the spear. The arm with which she had been holding it dangled unnaturally. She slumped in her saddle, catching its pommel with her other hand.

Janarrl scrambled to his feet, eyed his daughter and the boar. Then his gaze traveled slowly around the glade, full circle.

Glavas Rho's apprentice was gone.

* * *

NORTH be south, east be west. Copse be glade and gully crest. Dizziness all paths invest. Leaves and grasses, do the rest."

Mouse mumbled the chant through swollen lips almost as though he were talking into the ground on which he lay. His fingers arranging themselves into cabalistic symbols, he thumbed a pinch of green powder from a tiny pouch and tossed it into the air with a wrist-flick that made him wince. The charm completed, he lay still and the pains in his bruised flesh and bones became more bearable. He listend to the sounds of the hunt trail off in the distance.

His face was pushed close to a patch of grass. He saw an ant laboriously climb a blade, fall to the ground, and then continue on its way. For a moment he felt a bond of kinship between himself and the tiny insect. He remembered the black boar whose unexpected charge had given him a chance to escape and for a strange moment his mind linked it with the ant.

Vaguely he thought of the pirates who had threatened his life in the west. But their gay ruth-

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lessness had been a different thing from the premeditated and presavored brutality of Janarrl's huntsmen.

Gradually anger and hate began to swirl in him. He saw the gods of Glavas Rho, their formerly serene faces white and sneering. He heard the words of the old incantations, but they twanged with a new meaning. Then these visions receded, and he saw only a whirl of grinning faces and cruel hands. Somewhere in it the white, guilt-stricken face of a girl. Swords, sticks, whips. All spinning. And at the center, like the hub of a wheel on which men are broken, the thick strong head of the Duke.

What was the teaching of Glavas Rho to that wheel? It had rolled over him and crushed him. What was white magic to Janarrl and his henchmen? Only a priceless parchment to be besmirched. Magic gems to be trampled in filth. Thoughts of deep wisdom to be pulped with their encasing brain.

BUT there was the other magic. The magic Glavas Rho had forbidden, sometimes smilingly but always with an underlying seriousness. The magic Mouse had learned of only by hints and warnings. The magic which stemmed from death and hate and pain and decay, which dealt in poisons and night-shrieks, which trickled down from the black spaces between the stars, which as Janarrl himself had said, cursed in the dark behind the back.

It was as if all Mouse's former knowledge—of small creatures and stars and beneficial sorceries and Nature's codes of courtesy—burnt in one swift sudden holocaust. And the black ashes took life and began to stir, and from them crept a host of night shapes, resembling those which had been burnt, but all distorted. Creeping, skulking, scurrying shapes. Heartless, all hate and terror, but as lovely to look on as spiders swinging along their geometrical webs.

To sound a hunting horn for that pack! To set them on the track of Janarrl!

The thought was exhilarating.

Deep in his brain an evil voice began to whisper, "The Duke must die. The Duke must die." And he knew that he would always hear that voice, until its purpose was fulfilled.

Laboriously he pushed himself up, feeling a stabbing pain that told of broken ribs. He wondered how he had managed to flee this far. Grinding his teeth, he stumbled across a clearing. By the time he had gotten into the shelter of the trees again, the pain had forced him to his hands and knees. He crawled on a little way, then collapsed.

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NEAR evening of the third day after the hunt, Ivrian stole down from her tower room, ordered the smirking groom to fetch her horse, and rode through the valley and across the stream and up the opposite hill until she reached the rock-sheltered house of Glavas Rho. The destruction she saw brought new misery to her white taut face. She dismounted and went close to the fire-gutted ruin, trembling lest she come upon the body of Glavas Rho. But it was not there. She could see that the ashes had been disturbed, as though someone had been searching through them and sifting them for any objects that might have escaped the flames. Everything was very quiet.

An inequality in the ground off toward the side of the clearing caught her eye and she walked in that direction. It was a new-made grave, and in place of a headstone was a small flat greenish stone with strange carvings on its surface.

A sudden little sound from the forest set her trembling and made her realize that she was very much afraid, only that up to this point her misery had outweighed her terror. She looked up and gave a gasping cry, for a face was peering at her through a hole in the leaves. It was a wild face, smeared with dirt and grass stains, smirched here and there with old patches of dried blood, shadowed by a stubble of beard. Then she recognized it.

"Mouse," she called haltingly.

She hardly knew the answering voice.

"So you have returned to gloat over the wreckage caused by your treachery."

"No, Mouse, no!" she cried, "I did not intend this. You must believe me."

"Liar! It was your father's men who killed him and burnt his house."

"But I never thought they would!"

"Never thought they would!—as if that's any excuse. You are so afraid of your father that you would tell him anything. You live by fear."

"Not always, Mouse. In the end I killed the boar."

"So much the worse!—killing the beast the gods had sent to kill your father."

"But truly I never killed the boar. I was only boasting when I said so—I thought you liked me brave. I have no memory of that killing. My mind went black. I think my dead mother entered me and drove the spear."

"Liar and changer of lies! But I'll amend my judgment: you live by fear except when your father whips you to courage. I should have realized that and warned Glavas Rho against you. But I had dreams about you."

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"You called me Misling," she said faintly.

"Aye, we played at being mice, forgetting cats are real. And then while I was away, you were frightened by mere whippings into betraying Glavas Rho to your father!"

MOUSE, do not condemn me." Ivrian was sobbing. "I know that my life has been nothing but fear. Ever since I was a child my father has tried to force me to believe that cruelty and hate are the laws of the universe. He has tortured and tormented me. There was no one to whom I could turn, until I found Glavas Rho and learned that the universe has laws of sympathy and love that shape even death and the seeming hates. But now Glavas Rho is dead and I am more frightened and alone than ever. I need your help, Mouse. You studied under Glavas Rho. You know his teachings. Come and help me."

His laughter mocked her. "Come out and be betrayed? Be whipped again while you look on? Listen to your sweet lying voice, while your father's huntsmen creep closer? No, I have other plans."

"Plans?" she questioned. Her voice was apprehensive. "Mouse, your life is in danger so long as you lurk here. My father's men are sworn to slay you on sight. I would die, I tell you, if they caught you. Don't delay, get away. Only tell me first that you do not hate me." And she moved toward him.

Again his laughter mocked her.

"You are beneath my hate," came the stinging words. "I feel only contempt for your cowardly weakness. Glavas Rho talked too much of love. There are laws of hate in the universe, shaping even its loves, and it is time I made them work for me. Come no closer! I do not intend to betray my plans to you, or my new hidey-holes. But this much I will tell you, and listen well. In seven days your father's torment begins."

And then his face was gone and the leaves framed only a dark hole. She blundered into the forest after him, calling out "Mouse! Mouse!" and trying to follow the receding laughter. But it died away, and she found herself in a gloomy hollow, and she began to realize how evil the apprentice's laughter had sounded. Then panic seized her, and she fled back through the undergrowth, brambles catching at her clothes and twigs stinging her cheeks, until she had regained the clearing and was galloping back through the dusk, a thousand fears besetting her and her heart sick with the thought there was now no one in the wide world who did not hate and despise her.

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When she reached the stronghold, it seemed to crouch above her like an ugly jag-crested monster, and when she passed through the great gateway, it seemed to her that the monster had gobbled her up forever.

* * *

COME nightfall on the seventh day, when dinner was being served in the great banquet hall, with much loud talk and crunching of rushes and clashing of silver plates, Janarrl stifled a cry of pain and clapped his hand to his heart.

"It is nothing," he said a moment later to the thin-faced henchman sitting at his side. "Give me a cup of wine! That will stop it twinging."

But he continued to look pale and ill at ease, and he ate little of the meat that was served up in great smoking slices. His little eyes kept roving about the table, finally settling on his daughter.

"Stop staring at me in that gloomy way, girl!" he called. "One would think that you had poisoned my wine and were watching to see green spots come out on me. Or red ones edged with black, belike."

This brought a general guffaw of laughter which seemed to please the Duke, for he tore off the wing of a fowl and gnawed at it hungrily, but the next moment he gave another sudden cry of pain, louder than the first, staggered to his feet, clawed convulsively at his chest, and then pitched over on the table where he lay groaning and writhing in his pain.

"The Duke is stricken," the thin-faced henchman announced portentously after bending over him. "Carry him to bed. One of you loosen his shirt. He gasps for air."

A flurry of whispering went up and down the table. As the great door to his private apartments was opened for the Duke, a heavy gust of chill air made the torches flicker and turn blue, so that shadows crowded into the hall. Ivrian felt the others draw away from her with suspicious glances and mutterings, as if they were certain there had been truth in the Duke's jest. She did not look up. After a while someone came and told her that the Duke commanded her presence. Without a word she rose and followed.

The Duke's face was gray and furrowed with pain, but he had control of himself, though with each breath his hand tightened convulsively on the edge of the bed until his knuckles were like knobs of rock. He was propped up with pillows and a furred robe had been tucked closely about his shoulders and long-legged braziers glowed around the bed. In spite of all he was shivering convulsively.

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"COME here, girl," he ordered in a low, labored voice that hissed against his drawn lips. "You know what has happened. My heart pains as though there were a fire under it and yet my skin is cased in ice. There is a stabbing in my joints as if long needles pierced clear through the marrow. It is wizard's work."

"Wizard's work, beyond doubt," confirmed Giscorl, the thin-faced henchman, who stood at the head of the bed. "And there is no need to guess who. That young serpent whom you did not kill quickly enough ten days ago! He's been reported skulking in the woods, aye, and talking to . . . certain ones," he added, eyeing Ivrian narrowly, suspiciously.

A spasm of agony shook the Duke. "I should have stamped out whelp with sire," he groaned. Then his eyes shifted back to Ivrian. "Look, girl, you've been seen poking about in the forest where the old wizard was killed. It's believed you talked with his cub."

Ivrian wet her lips, tried to speak, shook her head. She could feel her father's eyes probing into her. Then his fingers reached out and twisted themselves in her hair.

"I believe you're in league with him!" His whisper was like a rusty knife. "You're helping him to do this to me. Admit it! Admit!" And he thrust her cheek against the nearest brazier so that her hair smoked and her "No" became a shuddering scream. The brazier swayed and Giscorl steadied it. Through Ivrian's scream the Duke snarled, "Your mother once held red coals to prove her honor."

A ghostly blue flame ran up Ivrian's hair. The Duke jerked her from the brazier and fell back against the pillows.

"Send her away," he finally whispered faintly, each word an effort. "She's a coward and wouldn't dare to hurt even me. Meantime, Giscorl, send out more men to hunt through the woods. They must find his lair before dawn, or I'll rupture my heart withstanding the pain."

Curtly Giscorl motioned Ivrian toward the door. She cringed, and slunk from the room, fighting down tears. Her cheek pulsed with pain. She was not aware of the strangely speculative smile with which the hawk-faced henchman watched her out.

* * *

IVRIAN stood at the narrow window of her room watching the little bands of horsemen come and go, their torches glowing like will o' the wisps in the woods. The stronghold was full of mysterious movement. The very stones seemed restlessly alive, as if they shared the torment of their master.

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She felt herself drawn toward a certain point out there in the darkness. A memory kept recurring to her of how one day Glavas Rho had showed her a small cavern in the hillside and had warned her that it was an evil place, where much baneful sorcery had been done in the past. Her fingertips moved round the crescent-shaped blister on her cheek and over the rough streak in her hair.

Finally her uneasiness and the pull from the night became too strong for her. She dressed in the dark and edged open the door of her chamber. The corridor seemed for the moment deserted. She hurried along it, keeping close to the wall, and darted down the worn rounded hummocks of the stone stair. The tramp of footsteps sent her hurrying into a niche, where she cowered while two huntsmen strode glum-faced toward the Duke's chamber. They were dust-stained and stiff from riding.

"No one'll find him in all that dark," one of them muttered. "It's like hunting an ant in a cellar."

The other nodded. "And wizards can change landmarks and make forest paths turn on themselves, so that all searchers are befuddled."

As soon as they were past Ivrian hastened into the banquet hall, now dark and empty, and through the kitchen with its high brick ovens and its huge copper kettles glinting in the shadows.

Outside in the courtyard torches were flaring and there was a bustle of activity as grooms brought fresh horses or led off spent ones, but she trusted to her huntsman's costume to let her pass unrecognized. Keeping to the shadows, she worked her way around to the stables. Her horse moved restlessly and neighed when she slipped into the stall, but quieted at her low whisper. A few moments and it was saddled, and she was leading it around to the open fields at the back. No searching parties seemed to be near, so she mounted and rode swiftly toward the wood.

HER mind was a storm of anxieties. She could not explain to herself how she had dared come this far, except that the attraction toward that point in the night—the cavern against which Glavas Rho had warned her—possessed a sorcerous insistence not to be denied.

Then when the forest engulfed her, she suddenly felt that she was committing herself to the arms of darkness and putting behind forever the grim stronghold and its cruel occupants. The ceiling of leaves blotted out most of the stars. She trusted to a light rein on her horse and her

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memory to guide her straight. And in this she was successful, for within a half hour she reached a shallow ravine which led past the cavern she sought.

Now, for the first time, her horse became uneasy. It balked and uttered little whinnying cries of fear and tried repeatedly to turn off as she urged it along the ravine. Its pace slowed to a walk. Finally it refused to move further. Its ears were laid back and it was trembling all over.

Ivrian dismounted and moved on. The forest was portentously quiet, as if all animals and birds —even the insects—had gone. The darkness ahead was almost tangible, as if built of black bricks just beyond her hand.

Then Ivrian became aware of the green glow, vague and faint at first as the ghosts of an aurora. Gradually it grew brighter and acquired a bickering quality, as the leafy curtains between her and it became fewer. Suddenly she found herself staring directly at it—a thick, heavy, soot-edge flame that writhed instead of danced. If green slime could be transmuted to fire, it would have that look. It burned in the mouth of a shallow cavern.

Then, beside the flame, she saw the face of the apprentice of Glavas Rho, and in that instant an agony of horror and sympathy tore at her mind.

The face seemed inhuman—more a green mask of torment than anything alive. The cheeks were drawn in; the eyes were unnaturally wild; it was very pale, and dripping with cold sweat induced by intense inward effort. There was much suffering in it, but also much power—power to control the thick twisting shadows that seemed to crowd around the green flame, power to master the forces of hate that were being marshalled. At regular intervals the cracked lips moved and the arms and hands made set gestures.

It seemed to Ivrian that she heard the mellow voice of Glavas Rho repeating a statement he had once made to Mouse and to her. "None can use black magic without straining the soul to the utter most—and staining it into the bargain. None can inflict suffering without enduring the same. None can send death by spells and sorcery without walking on the brink of death's own abyss, aye and dripping his own blood into it. The forces black magic evokes are like two-edged poisoned swords with grips studded with scorpion stings. Only a strong man, leather-handed, in whom hate and evil are very powerful, can wield them, and he only for a space."

IN Mouse's face Ivrian saw the living example of those words.

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Step by step she moved toward him, feeling no more power to control her movements than if she were in a nightmare. She became aware of shadowy presences, as if she were pushing her way through cobweb veils. She came so near that she could have reached out her hand and touched him, and still he did not notice her, as if his spirit were out beyond the stars, grappling the blackness there.

Then a twig snapped under her foot and Mouse sprang up with terrifying swiftness, the energy of every taut muscle released. He snatched up his sword and lunged at the intruder. But, when the green blade was within a hand's breadth of Ivrian's throat, he checked it with an effort. He glared, lips drawn back from his teeth. Although he had checked his sword, he seemed only half to recognize her.

AT that instant Ivrian was buffeted by a mighty gust of wind, which came from the mouth of the cavern, a strange wind, carrying shadows. The green fire burned low, running rapidly along the sticks that were its fuel, and almost snuffing out.

Then the wind ceased and the thick darkness lifted, to be replaced by a wan gray light heralding the dawn. The fire turned from green to yellow. The wizard's apprentice staggered, and the sword dropped from his fingers.

"Why did you come here?" he questioned thickly.

She saw how his face was wasted with hunger and hate, how his clothing bore the signs of many nights spent in the forest like an animal, under no roof. Then suddenly she realized that she knew the answer to his question.

"Oh Mouse," she whispered, "Let us go away from this place. Here is only horror." He swayed, and she caught hold of him, "Take me with you, Mouse," she said.

He stared frowningly into her eyes. "You do not hate me then, for what I have done to your father? Or what I have done to the teachings of Glavas Rho?" he questioned puzzledly. "You are not afraid of me?

"I am afraid of everything," she whispered, clinging to him. "I am afraid of you, yes, a great deal afraid. But that fear can be unlearned. Oh Mouse, will you take me away?—to Lankhmar or to Earth's End?"

He took her by the shoulders. "I have dreamt of that," he said slowly. "But you . . . ?"

"Apprentice of Glavas Rho!" thundered a stern, triumphant voice, "I apprehend you in the name of Duke Janarrl for sorceries practiced on the Duke's body!"

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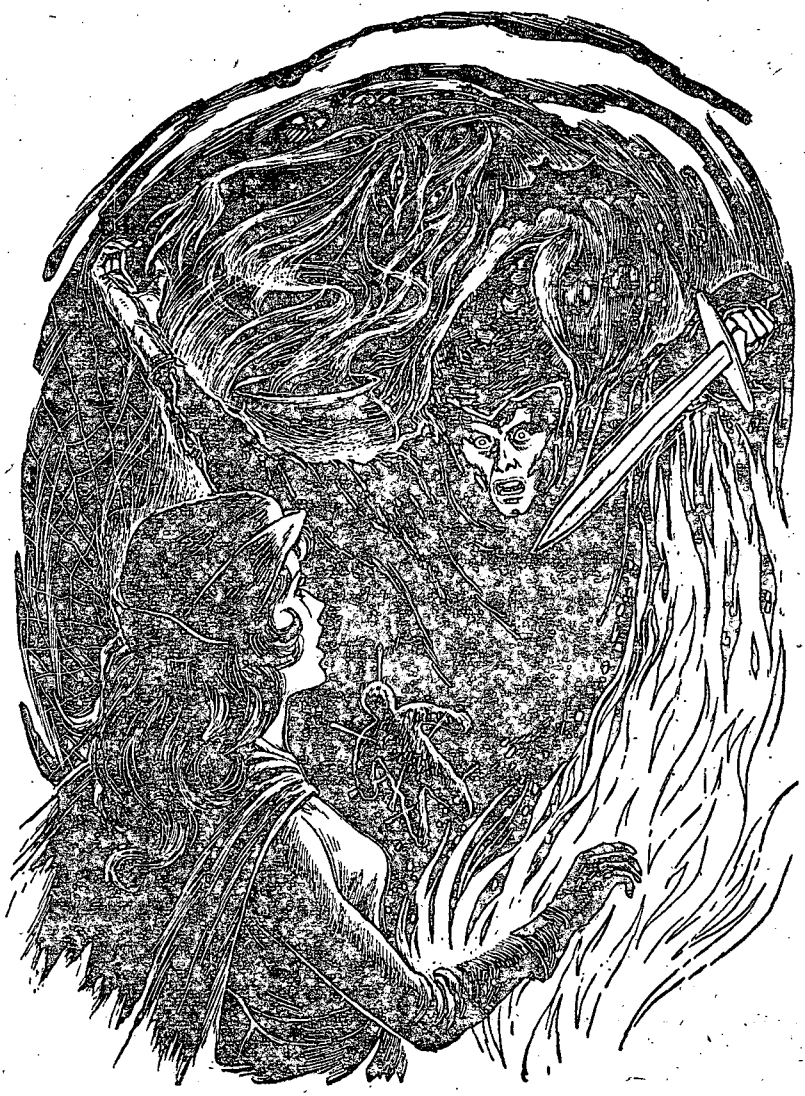

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FOUR huntsmen were springing forward from the undergrowth with swords drawn and Giscorl three paces behind them. Mouse met them halfway. They soon found that this time they were not dealing with a youth blinded by anger, but with a cold and cunning swordsman. There was a kind of magic in his primitive blade. He ripped up the arm of his first assailant with a well-judged thrust, disarmed the second with an unexpected twist, then cooly warded off the blows of the other two, retreating slowly. But other huntsmen followed the first four and circled round. Still fighting with terrible intensity and giving blow for blow, Mouse went down under the sheer weight of their attack. They pinioned his arms and dragged him to his feet. He was bleeding from a cut in the cheek, but he carried his head high, though it was beast-shaggy. His bloodshot eyes sought out Ivrian.

"I should have known," he said evenly, "that having betrayed Glava Rho, you would not rest until you had betrayed me. You did your work well, girl. I trust you take much pleasure in my death."

Giscorl laughed. Like a whip, the words of Mouse stung Ivrian. She could not meet his eyes. Then she became aware that there was a man on horseback behind Giscorl and, looking up, she saw that it was her father. His wide body was bent by pain. His face was a death's mask. It seemed a miracle that he managed to cling to the saddle.

"Quick, Giscorl!" he hissed.

But the thin-faced henchman was already sniffing around in the cavern's mouth like a well trained ferret. He gave a cry of satisfaction and lifted down a little figure from a ledge above the fire, which he next stamped out. He carried the figure gingerly as though it were exceedingly delicate. As he passed by her, Ivrian saw that it was a clay doll wide as it was tall and dressed in brown and yellow leaves, and that its features were a grotesque copy of her father's. It was pierced in several places by long bone needles.

"This is the thing, oh Master," said Giscorl, holding it up, but the Duke only repeated, "Quick, Giscorl!" The henchman started to withdraw the largest needle which pierced the doll's middle, but the Duke gasped in agony and cried, "Forget not the balm!" Whereupon Giscorl uncorked with his teeth and poured a large vial of sirupy liquid over the doll's body and the Duke sighed a little with relief. Then Giscorl very carefully withdrew the needles, one by one, and as each needle was withdrawn the Duke's breath whistled and he clapped his hand to his shoulder

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or thigh, as if it were from his own body that the needles were being drawn. After the last one was out, he sat slumped in his saddle for a long time. When he finally looked up, the transformation that had taken place was astonishing. There was color in his face, and the lines of pain had vanished, and his voice was loud and ringing.

"Take the prisoner back to our stronghold to await our judgment," he cried. "Let this be a warning to all who would practice wizardry in our domain. Giscorl, you have proved yourself a faithful servant." His eyes rest on Ivrian. "You have played with witchcraft too often, girl, and need other instruction. As a beginning you will witness the punishment I shall visit on this foul wizardling."

"A small boon, oh Duke!" Mouse cried. He had been hosted onto a saddle and his legs tied under the horse's belly. "Keep your spying daughter out of my sight. And let her not look at me."

"Strike him in the lips, one of you," the Duke ordered. "Ivrian, ride close behind him—I command it."

SLOWLY the little cavalcade rode off toward the stronghold through the brightening dawn. Ivrian's horse had been brought to her and she took her place as bidden, sunk in a nightmare of misery and defeat. She seemed to see the pattern of her whole life laid out before her—past, present, and future—and it consisted of nothing but fear, loneliness, and pain. Even the memory of her mother, who had died when she was a little girl, was something that still brought a palpitation of panic to her heart. A bold handsome woman, who always had a whip in her hand, and whom even her father had feared. Ivrian remembered how when the servants had brought word that her mother had broken her neck in a fall from a horse, her only emotion had been fear that they were lying to her, and that this was some new trick of her mother's to put her off guard, and that some new punishment would follow.

Then, from the day of her mother's death, her father had shown her nothing but a strangely perverse cruelty. Perhaps it was his disgust at not having a son that made him treat her like a cowardly boy instead of a girl and encourage his lowliest followers to maltreat her—from the maids who played at ghosts around her bed to the kitchen wenches who put frogs in her milk and nettles in her salad.

Sometimes it seemed to her that anger at not having a son

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was too weak an explanation for her father's cruelties, and that he was revenging himself through Ivrian on his dead wife, whom he had certainly feared and who still influenced his actions, since he had never married again or openly taken mistresses. Or perhaps there was truth in what he had said of her mother and Glavas Rho—no, surely that must be a wild imagining of his anger. Or perhaps, as he sometimes told her, he was trying to make her live up to her mother's vicious and bloodthirsty example, trying to recreate his hated and adored wife in the person of her daughter, and finding a queer pleasure in the refractoriness of the material on which he worked and the grotesquerie of the whole endeavor.

Then in Glavas Rho Ivrian had found a refuge. When she had first chanced upon the white-bearded old man in her lonely wanderings through the forest, he had been mending the broken leg of a fawn and he had spoken to her softly of the ways of kindness and of the brotherhood of all life, human and animal. And she had come back day after day to hear her own vague intuitions revealed to her as deep truths and to take refuge in his wide sympathy . . . and to explored her timid friendship with his clever little apprentice. But now Glavas Rho was dead and Mouse had taken the spider's way, or the cat's path, as the old wizard had sometimes referred to bale magic.

SHE looked up and saw Mouse riding a little ahead and to one side of her, his hands bound behind him, his head and body bowed forward. Conscience smot her, for she knew she had been responsible for his capture. But worse than conscience was the pang of lost opportunity, for there ahead of her rode, doomed, the one man who might have saved her from her life.

A narrowing of the path brought her close beside him. She said hurriedly, ashamedly, "If there is anything I can do so that you will forgive me a little . . ."

The glance he bent on her, looking sidewise up, was sharp, appraising, and surprisingly alive.

"Perhaps you can," he murmured softly, so the huntsmen ahead might not hear. "As you must know, your father will have me tortured to death. You will be asked to watch it. Do just that. Keep your eyes riveted on mine the whole time. Sit close beside your father. Keep your hand on his arm. Aye, kiss him too. Above all, show no sign of fright or revulsion. Be like a statue carved of marble. Watch to the end. One other thing—wear, if you can, a gown of your mother's, or if not a

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gown, then some article of her clothing." He smiled at her thinly. "Do this and I will at least have the consolation of watching you flinch—and flinch—and flinch!"

"No mumbling charms now!" cried the huntsman suddenly, jerking Mouse's horse ahead.

Ivrian reeled as if she had been struck in the face. She had thought her misery could go no deeper, but Mouse's words had beaten it down a final notch. At that instant the cavalcade came into the open, and the stronghold loomed up ahead—a great horned and jag-crested blot on the sunrise. Never before had it seemed so much like a hideous monster. Ivrian felt that its high gates were the iron jaws of death.

* * *

JANARRL, striding into the torture chamber deep below his stronghold, experienced a hot wave of exultation, as when he and his huntsmen closed in around an animal for the kill. But atop the wave was a very faint foam of fear. His feelings were a little like those of a ravenously hungry man invited to a sumptuous banquet, but who has been warned by a fortuneteller to fear death by poison. He was haunted by the feverish frightened face of the man arm-wounded by the wizardling's corroded bronze sword. His eyes met those of Glavas Rho's apprentice, whose half-naked body was stretched—though not yet painfully so—upon the rack, and the Duke's sense of fear sharpened. They were too searching, those eyes, too cold and menacing, too suggestive of magical powers.

He told himself angrily that a little pain would soon change their look to one of trapped panic. He told himself that it was natural that he should still be on edge from last night's horrors, when his life had almost been pried from him by dirty sorceries. But deep in his heart he knew that fear was always with him—fear of anything or anyone that some day might be stronger than he and hurt him as he had hurt others—fear of the dead he had harmed and could hurt no longer—fear of his dead wife, who had indeed been stronger and crueller than he and who had humiliated him in a thousand ways that no one but he remembered.

But he also knew that his daughter would soon be here and that he could then shift off his fear on her; by forcing her to fear, he would be able to heal his own courage, as he had done innumerable times in the past.

So he confidently took his place and gave order that the torture begin.

AS the great wheel creaked and the leathern wristlets and

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anklets began to tighten a little, Mouse felt a qualm of helpless panic run over his body. It centered in his joints—those little deep-set hinges of bone normally exempt from danger. There was yet no pain. His body was merely stretched a little, as if he were yawning.

The low ceiling was close to his face. The flickering light of the torches revealed the mortices in the stone and the dusty cobwebs. Toward his feet he could see the upper portion of the wheel, and the two large hands that gripped its spokes, dragging them down effortlessly, very slowly, stopping for twenty heartbeats at a time. By turning his head and eyes to the side he could see the big figure of the Duke—not wide as his doll of him, but wide—sitting in a carven wooden chair, two armed men standing behind him. The Duke's brown hands, their jeweled rings flashing fire, were closed over the knobs on the chair-arms. His feet were firmly planted. His jaw was set. Only his eyes showed any uneasiness or vulnerability. They kept shifting from side to side—rapidly, regularly, like the pivoted ones of a doll.

"My daughter should be here," he heard the Duke say abruptly in a flat voice. "Hasten her. She is not to be permitted to delay."

One of the men hurried away.

Then the twinges of pain commenced, striking at random in the forearm, the back, the knee, the shoulder. With an effort Mouse composed his features. He fixed his attention on the faces around him, surveying them in detail as if they formed a picture, noting the highlights on the cheeks and eyes and beards and the shadows, wavering with the torchflames, that their figures cast upon the low walls.

Then those low walls melted and, as if distance were no longer real, he saw the whole wide world beyond them: great reaches of forest, bright amber desert, and turquoise sea; the Lake of Monsters, the City of Ghouls, magnificent Lankhmar, the Land of the Eight Cities, the Trollstep Mountains, the fabulous Cold Waste and by some chance striding there an open-faced, hulking red-haired youth he'd glimpsed among the pirates—all places and persons he'd never now encounter, but showing in wondrous fine detail, as if carved and tinted by a master miniaturist.

WITH startling suddenness the pain returned and increased. The twinges became needle stabs—a cunning prying at his insides—fingers of force crawling up his arms and legs toward his spine—an unsettling at the hips. He desperately tensed his muscles against them.

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Then he heard the Duke's voice, "Not so fast. Stop a while." Mouse thought he recognized the overtones of panic in the voice. He twisted his head despite the pangs it cost him and watched the uneasy eyes. They swung to and fro, like little pendulums.

Suddenly then, as if time were no longer real, Mouse saw another scene in this chamber. The Duke was there and his eyes swinging from side to side, but he was younger and there was open panic and horror in his face. Close beside him was a boldly handsome woman in a dark red dress cut low in the bosom and with slashes inset with yellow silk. While stretched upon the rack itself in Mouse's place was a strappingly beautiful but now pitifully whimpering maid, whom the woman in red was questioning, with equal coldness and insistence on detail, about her amorous encounters with the Duke and her attempt on the life of herself, the Duke's wife, by poison.

Footsteps broke that scene, as stones destroy a reflection in water, and brought the present back. Then a voice: "Your daughter comes, oh Duke."

Mouse steeled himself. He had not realized how much he dreaded this meeting, even in his pain. He felt bitterly certain that Ivrian would not have heeded his words. She was not evil, he knew, and she had not meant to betray him, but by the same token she was without courage. She would come whimpering, and her anguish would eat at what little self-control he could muster and doom his last wild wishful schemings.

Lighter footsteps were approaching now—hers. There was something curiously measured about them.

It meant added pain for him to turn his head so he could see the doorway; yet he did so, watching her figure define itself as it entered the region of ruddy light cast by the torches.

Then he saw the eyes. They were wide and staring. They were fixed straight on him. And they did not turn away. The face was pale, calm with a deadly serenity.

He saw she was dressed in a gown of dark red, cut low in the bosom and with slashes inset with yellow silk.

And then the soul of Mouse exulted, for he knew that she had done what he had bidden her. Glavas Rho had said, "The sufferer can hurl his suffering back upon his oppressor, if only there be a channel for his hate." Now there was a channel open for him, leading to Janarrl's inmost being.

Hungrily, Mouse fastened his gaze on Ivrian's unblinking eyes, as if they were pools of black

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magic in a cold moon. Those eyes, he knew, could receive what he could give.

He saw her seat herself by the Duke. He saw the Duke peer sidewise at his daughter and start up as if she were a ghost. But Ivrian did not look toward him, only her hand stole out and fastened on his wrist, and the Duke sank shuddering back into his chair.

"Proceed!" he heard the Duke call out to the torturers, and this time the panic in the Duke's voice was very close to the surface.

THE wheel turned. Mouse heard himself groan piteously. But there was something in him now that could ride on top of the pain and that had no part in the groan. He felt that there was a path between his eyes and Ivrian's—a rock-walled channel through which the forces of human spirit and of more than human spirit could be sent roaring like a mountain torrent. And still she did not turn away. No expression crossed her face when he groaned, only her eyes seemed to darken as she grew still more pale. Mouse sensed a shifting of feelings in his body. Through the scalding waters of pain, his hate rose to the surface, rode atop too. He pushed his hate down the rock-walled channel, saw Ivrian's face grow more deathlike as it struck her, saw her tighten her grip on her father's wrist, sensed the trembling that her father no longer could master.

The wheel turned. From far off Mouse heard a steady, heart-tearing whimpering. But a part of him was outside the room now—high, he felt, in the frosty emptiness above the world. He saw spread out below him a nighted panorama of wooded hills and valleys. Near the summit of one hill was a tight clump of tiny stone towers. But as if he were endowed with a magical vulture's eye, he could see through the walls and roofs of those towers into the very foundations beneath, into a tiny murky room in which men tinier than insects clustered and cowered together. Some were working at a mechanism which inflicted pain on a creature that might have been a bleached and writhing ant. And the pain of that creature, whose tiny thin cries he could faintly hear, had a strange effect on him at this height, strengthening his inward powers and tearing away a veil from his eyes—a veil that had hitherto hidden a whole black universe.

For he began to hear about him a mighty murmuring. The frigid darkness was beaten by wings of stone. The steely light of the stars cut into his brain

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like painless knives. He felt a wild black whirlpool of evil, like a torrent of black tigers, blast down upon him from above, and he knew that it was his to control. He let it surge through his body and then hurled it down the unbroken path that led to two points of darkness in the tiny room below—the two staring eyes of Ivrian, daughter of Duke Janarrl. He saw the black of the whirlwind's heart spread on her face like an inkblot, seep down her white arms and dye her fingers. He saw her hand tighten convulsively on her father's arm. He saw her reach her other hand toward the Duke and lift her open lips to his cheek.

Then, for one moment while the torch flames whipped low and blue in a physical wind that seemed to blow through the morticed stones of the buried chamber . . . for one moment while the torturers and guards dropped the tools of their trades for one indelible moment of hate fulfilled and revenge accomplished, Mouse saw the strong, square face of Duke Janarrl shake in the agitation of ultimate terror, the features twisted like heavy cloth wrung between invisible hands, then crumpled in defeat and death.

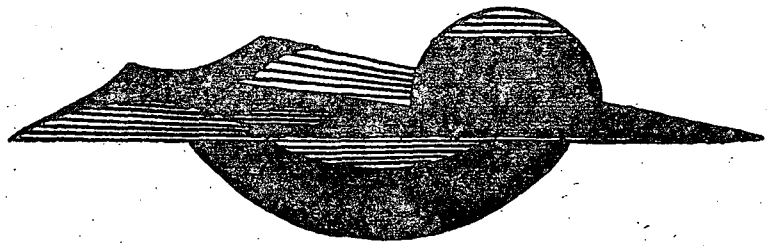
* * *

The strand supporting Mouse snapped. His spirit dropped like a plummet toward the buried room.

An agonizing pain filled him, but it promised life, not death. Above him was the low stone ceiling. The hands on the wheel were white and slender. Then he knew that the pain was that of release from the rack.

Slowly Ivrian loosened the rings of leather from his wrists and ankles. Slowly she helped him down, supporting him with all her strength as they dragged their way across the room, from which everyone else had fled in terror save for one crumpled jeweled figure in a carven chair. They paused by that and he surveyed the dead thing with the cool, satisfied, masklike gaze of a cat. Then on and up they went, Ivrian and the Gray Mouser, through corridors emptied by panic, and out into the night.

THE END



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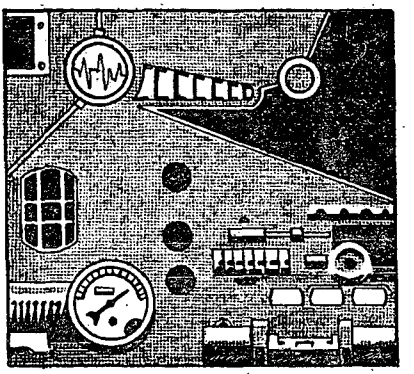
By THOMAS M. DISCH

THE DOUBLE TIMER



Non-interference is a law of nature.

But there are other laws for those who meddle with time.

8:30 It started off bad. I was half an hour late getting up. The alarm had been pushed in, and Karen had left her bed and was puttering in the kitchen. I had started to shout something to her about trying to make me late for work, when I remembered that this was Be Kind To Karen Week.

So I changed it to "Good morning, honey What's it like out?"

She looked in smiling. "A beautiful morning. Too warm for October. Just right for me."

Anyhow I was up and had an hour and a half to get to the station house. Nothing had gone wrong except my nerves. Morning's not the best time for me.

I shaved and made myself human. Then I took out the blue pin-stripe from the closet and tore off the cleaner's plastic bag. The gray suit I had worn yesterday was draped over a chair. I took the belt from it and hung it

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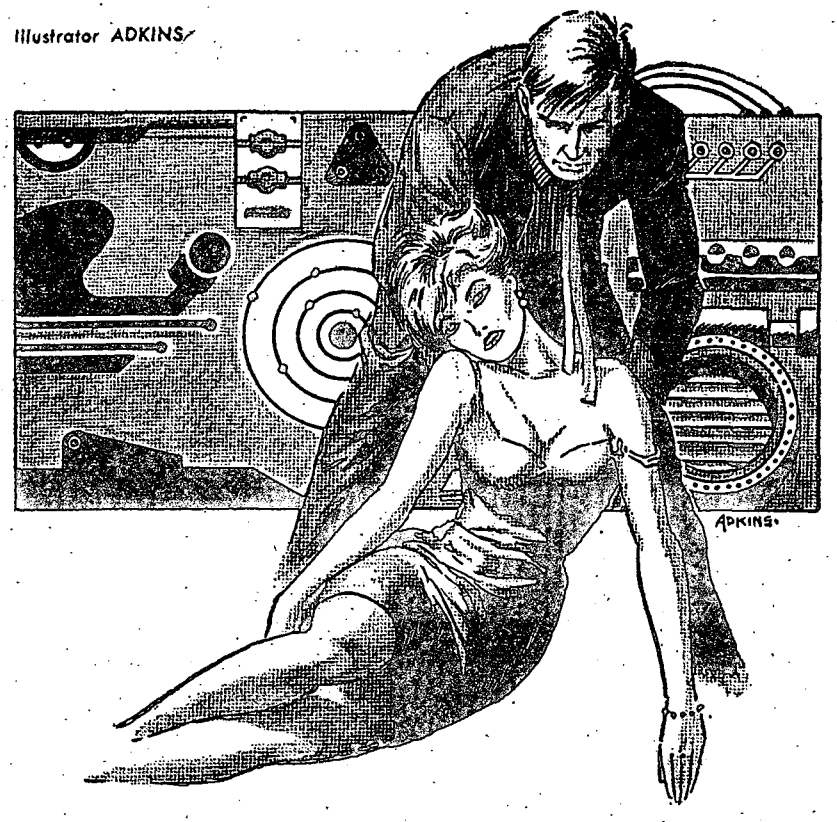
Illustrator ADKINS



up, making sure that my keys and wallet were still in the pocket.

I almost made my first mistake then. In all my planning I'd never thought of the money I'd need that day for carfare or lunch. The trouble with thinking along a double time-scheme is getting them mixed up this way. It would have been a hell of a thing to get stuck outside the apartment without money, since I had already returned home to get it. Some beginning for the perfect crime! But maybe that isn't clear. Give me time.

I took a few bills from the pocket of the pants hanging in the closet and went out to the kitchen.

9:00 Breakfast with Karen. We have tickets for a musical that opens tonight. Three tickets —one for our good friend Eric. Karen talked about the musical, then about Eric. Eric is paint-

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ing this, Eric is doing that. She enjoys flaunting her adultery.

One of his paintings has been hanging in the middle of the living room for the past year. A nude. Like a knife in my side to keep the wound fresh. It was his anniversary present to us. Eric has a great sense of humor. But I am past the stage now when the wound smarts. I was past it long ago.

Somewhere in the city, even as I sat at the table listening to Karen's prattle, Irving Venner was making his way to our apartment. Irving Venner—that's me. And Karen was soon to be the victim of a murder. I had a second cup of coffee and looked at her.

She was beautiful. Long white-blond hair loose over her bare shoulders. Blue eyes, fair skin, and a lithe body to match. Even the slightly receding chin and the front teeth that were a little too long were defects that she had turned to her advantage. She had learned long ago to keep her lips closed over her teeth, and the slight tension this required gave her an air of constant bemusement, of being always just about to smile.

She seemed to find pleasure in the most commonplace circumstances, at breakfast, on a walk —or talking to Eric. Then more than ever her whole face seemed to come alive. Her eyes sparkled. Her fingers made nervous little patterns, brushing back her hair, holding a glass, or just resting a moment on her lap. And always that hint of a smile, as though she could not keep herself from mocking me. That smile was an agony to me. At last I determined to end the mockery. When I knew that I was going to kill Karen, my suffering almost disappeared. I could even enjoy how beautiful she was, despite her treachery, as I sat with her waiting for the moment when I should leave for work.

* * *

9:20 I left the apartment. We live on the second floor and I use the stairway instead of waiting for the elevator. A figure stood in the dimly-lit alcove behind the staircase on the first floor. He nodded to me. I repressed my excitement and walked on. The figure was me. Everything had gone all right. Karen was as good as dead. That's what the nod meant. In fact, that "figure" knew that she *was* dead.

As I opened the street door, I heard footsteps going up the stairs. Accustomed as only a police investigator can be to the paradoxes of time-travel, it did seem like a dream. There I was, standing still and listening to Irving Venner walk up the stairs.

Something similar had happened to me once before by acci-

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dent. I had had to investigate a hit-and-run case. After being shifted back into the morning, I had walked to the corner where it was going to happen. My way had taken me past the street I live on, and I'd seen myself going down into the subway on my way to work. It was then I got the idea. Just a germ of it but the germ grew. I realized that I was one of the very few people in the world who could commit a crime and get away with it.

According to the Police Code, even the incident at the subway was criminal negligence. I could have been prosecuted if I'd ever told about it. There's a good reason for that rule. Back at the end of the 20th Century when the police started using the Machines, some smart operators thought they'd strike up a friendship with themselves. It's a natural idea once you start thinking about time-travel. I can't remember all the stale comedies and television skits I've seen with that gimmick. Natural but not healthy. The smart operators had to be put away.

The psychologists say it's not the person in the past seeing himself a few hours older (the limit is eighteen hours),—that's like meeting some long-lost relation, somebody who's essentially a stranger. What really did it was getting shifted back and then doing exactly what you could remember having seen yourself do. They could remember everything that happened and couldn't change a second of it. The idea of predestination is too much for a human being in big doses. *Déja vu* is the expression but such a *déja vu* as never was before. Most of them slipped off into catatonia after a few days and never came back.

I wasn't going to make a mistake like that. As for the time later in the day when I would see myself, I knew from experience that a glance wasn't going to do any harm. The nod was a risk, but I felt I could stomach that much predestination.

9:45 I arrived at the station house no more over-excited than I suppose any murderer must be right before the gala performance. I didn't let it show. I'm a past master at that kind of camouflage. I'd had to learn it, living with Karen.

As Karen had said, it was a beautiful morning. One of those crisp, bright October days that can make themselves felt even in the city. Wisps of haze circled the horizon to the west toward the river. A flight of sparrows rose from the gutter and lighted on the pediment of the old-fashioned station house as I walked up the steps. A nervous criminal might have taken this for an omen. But I wasn't nervous. Be-

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sides, how do you tell whether an omen is good or bad?

9:50 I had the office to myself. Ordinarily Lowell Clemenson, the other investigator for the city, would be in the room, but Lowell had started out on his vacation a week ago. Lowell, being the athletic type, (I'm portly, myself) was somewhere in Canada paddling a canoe. Quite out of reach.

Lowell and I are the only two people in the city licensed to use the Machine. To be an investigator you have to take tests for intelligence and emotional stability. Then a battery of physicals. Your character is investigated from the age of two. (My middle name is Probity.) They train you for five years, and once you've got the job, you have to see an analyst regularly. There isn't any surplus of investigators.

But then there doesn't have to be. In the year 2042, crimes are as common as buffalo. The Machines stopped it. Any thug who tried to pull something would be found out in a day. The absolute certainty of discovery has eliminated all but the most desparate crimes. Nobody robs banks when they know that Someone is watching them from concealment, when they know that every action they might perform is foreknown by that Someone, who has made his plans accordingly. In the year 2042, the only criminals are men who are beyond reckoning consequences, the only crimes are crimes of passion, invariably followed by a suicide.

Not for me, thank you. I'm quite happy living except for one thorn in my side. And that I knew, looking up at the clock over the file cabinets, would be very shortly removed.

* * *

10:00 The phone-call came.

"Hello. Chief?" It was my own voice.

"This is he," I answered.

Then I held my hand tightly over the earpiece. It would have been interesting to listen, but it might bring on a *déja vu* later, when it would be important to have my wits about me. Besides, I knew already what I was saying on the phone. I had gone over it many times. What need then to listen?

I waited exactly two minutes to lift my hand. The connection was broken. I put the receiver back in its cradle and gave it a friendly pat.

11:30 Went to the Chief's office. He was reading one of those 20th Century detective stories that he ferrets out of used book stores. I think he's nostalgic

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about the Good Old Days before the Machines, when a policeman was more than a traffic co-ordinator or a registrar of accidents and public nuisances. The few real crimes left in the world aren't even in his department. He's not licensed to use the Machines.

"How's business?" I asked him.

"Slow," he said, laying the book aside. "A couple drunks that had to be removed from the sidewalks and a traffic accident."

"Anything bad?"

"No. McNamara's out there now. Somebody sideswiped by a taxi. He's only dazed. An ambulance is taking him in for x-rays. The only real excitement this morning was *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd.*"

I was slow to pick that one up.

"Murder!"

He laughed and showed me the cover of his book. "I can't say yet who did kill him. Never can tell to the end of the damn books. How're things with you?"

"All right. A little dull in the office with Lowell gone. Any word from him?"

"Not since the postcard last week. He's probably lost by now in dark wildernesses."

He couldn't be lost enough at that moment as far as I was concerned.

"Not Lowell," I said.

"How's Karen?"

His question was not asked altogether for form's sake. Karen was on the best terms with the Chief, and with everyone else on the force for that matter. We had a reputation for being the model couple.

Karen and I are so good at acting that we even performed for each other. As far as she knew, I had never seen what was going on between her and Eric. I'd never caught them *flagrante delicto;* Karen was too careful for that. My grounds for suspicion were whispers and looks, accretions of small, innocent-seeming occasions that, in the course of time, had built a solid pyramid of ugly truth. But they would never have stood up in a divorce court. If I had ever revealed my suspicions to Grierson, the analyst that I had to see every week, he would probably have considered them delusional. Then Irving Probity Venner would have been out of a job or (which would be worse) set out on some corner to blow a whistle at the traffic. No thank you.

There had been no help for it. I had had to act by myself.

"Karen? Oh, Karen is fine." I replied absently. Then I changed my tone. "Actually she was a little sick this morning. Upset stomach, nothing serious. She thought she'd be all right by tonight."

"What's tonight?"

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"We've got tickets to Tunis *Forty-Two*. It opens tonight. Taking a friend. The anniversary's coming up again soon, and we're doing a little celebrating in advance."

"I hope Karen is feeling better. Why don't you call her up?"

"She's probably in bed. The best cure is a rest cure, as Karen says."

No one of these facts was essential to my plan, but together they presented a plausible picture of the everyday. And I had planted my good friend Eric in that picture.

The Chief's secretary came in, and I turned to leave the office. When I reached the door, I looked back at him.

"I'm going to have an early lunch around the corner. I didn't have my usual breakfast this morning."

"Take your time." He added his standing joke, "There's no crime wave this week."

I left the station at eleven-thirty-three. It had turned cooler. The sky had changed from a crisp autumn blue to a dull autumn gray. A stiff breeze was blowing in from the river.

I didn't go to eat around the corner but to a cafeteria a block away where the cashier knew me. I took a cup of coffee and a ham sandwich to a table directly in front of her and began to do the crossword puzzle in the morning newspaper. As soon as I sat down it began to rain outside.

* * *

12:00 People dressed in summer clothes were coming into the cafeteria to get out of the wet. I had finished the puzzle and started to read the news.

Nothing very exciting. There never is. A few items about the cold war. A rally on the stock market. A scandal in the Bureau of Licenses. (The Machines can't do much about bribery.) Except for the date—Oct. 17, 2042—and a fourth page story about manufacturing a substitute for penicillin from Martian mosses, the news was just the same as the news of eighty years ago.

Partly, it's the Machines. Quite a lot of History was criminality writ large. When every suspicion of a fraud or conspiracy could be confirmed or disproved with finality by relays of the Machines, criminality disappeared, and with it a good deal of History.

Partly, it's the times. You could see it starting in the Fifties and Sixties nearly a century ago. The idea of Progress was looking pretty sick even then. Every year the new cars were the same as the old models. Every year the cold war was impending or receding without getting anywhere. Every year the

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same things were talked about in Congress and tabled for the next session. Economic cycles still occurred, but they were leveling out. There was space travel, of course, but nobody ever figured out what to do with it.

There's a theory now that History works the same way as the S-curve of population growth. First, things stand still; then—Boom—everything shoots straight up. Progress. At last, it hits a plateau higher up and stays there.

That's, in fact, what I was thinking about at the cafeteria. Not Karen, who was probably dead at the moment. Not Eric, who was either dead or dying in the apartment, an apparent suicide. I thought about History. And waited.

12:30 Raining harder than ever. The cafeteria was packed. I waited five minutes on the chance it would clear up. It didn't and I had to dash back to the station house through the rain. I couldn't put my schedule in jeopardy. I got there soaked. The Chief's secretary was waiting for me in the lobby.

"The Chief is waiting to see you—in your office."

"What's up?" I asked in a tone calculated to show both nonchalence and surprise.

"You'd better see him."

The Chief was inexpertly smoking a cigarette. He only smoked when he was very upset.

"Sit down, Irving. I have something to tell you that I can hardly believe."

I sat. The Chief was leaning on the files, fanning the smoke of his cigarette from his eyes. A tear rolled down his cheek.

"Damn cigarettes. I don't know why I smoke them. It's just that . . ." His voice trailed off.

"What's wrong?" A hint of consternation behind a business-like manner.

"It's Karen, Irving. Karen is dead."

"It can't be . . . when I left, she was . . ." Confusion and shock are both easy to simulate.

"Karen was murdered."

"That's outrageous," I shouted at him. "People aren't murdered anymore, not people like Karen."

"She was found strangled by a deliveryman from your dry cleaner at a little before 12:30."

"Strangled!"

The Chief maintained a sympathetic silence. I turned from him to hide my emotions, or, rather, lack of them.

"But who . . ." I left the question hanging for him to pick up.

"No idea, Irving. We don't know of anyone else being there."

Something was wrong. Eric should have been found there, too. Eric, my wife's murderer, dead from taking his own rat

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poison. But he could have been in the kitchen, where the deliveryman wouldn't have seen him. He probably hadn't been discovered yet.

Turning back to the Chief, I asked, "Who did you send? When will they get there?"

"Stanley was there almost immediately."

"But who could have done such a thing?"

"There's no way *we* can tell. That's why . . ." He broke off, coughing furiously. "That's why, Irving," he said, grinding out the cigarette on the carpet, "we will have to send an investigator back to find out."

Something very definitely had gone wrong. Where in hell *was* Eric? The only way to find out was to shift back into the morning and find out what had happened. Or what was still to happen. But under the circumstances I didn't want to.

He went on, "We can't reach Lowell and we can't bring investigators in from another city, without more than eighteen hours of red tape. It's ticklish."

"You don't expect me to . . . to go back there? You can't ask that. Not to be there and know she's being strangled, perhaps to see it, and *do* nothing."

"That's what worries me. God knows, the thought of it gets me so mad, I couldn't trust myself to follow any Code. But I don't see how else we can find out who did it."

"But clues, evidence—you can find out that way."

"You know a murder conviction can't be made without an investigator's report or direct witnesses. There weren't any witnesses."

Tonelessly, I said, "Leave me alone for a while. I have to think. Karen, my God." He left, closing the door behind him.

THE interview had gone as scheduled, except that I really had to have time to think it out. I wouldn't have killed Karen if I hadn't been sure Eric would come. And I had killed Karen. When? That might give me a clue. I'd know at least whether my schedule had gone wrong. I rang the Chief on the intercom.

"Do you know yet when it happened?"

"The doctor just sent word. Around eleven-thirty."

I hung up the receiver.

That made sense. It had probably been a little earlier, of course. What could have induced me to kill her without having Eric to take the guilt off my shoulders?

Eric was always home at this time of day working. He had the instincts of a time-clock. If something had misfired and Eric wasn't taken care of, he'd answer the phone. But, perhaps, I

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had gone to his loft, which was near the apartment, and killed him there. In that case, he wouldn't answer. I dialed his number.

I waited twenty rings before hanging up. That decided it. I had gone to his loft. Maybe he had been sick this morning and couldn't accept an invitation to lunch. The solution lay in the past. I had to shift.

There was another reason, too. I had seen myself that morning in the alcove. It was a simple fact that I *had* gone back.

I called the Chief again.

"Can you send a doctor in here. I'll need something for my nerves if I have to do this."

He gave a sigh of relief.

"Sure thing, Irving. You know I hate to do this to you. I can't see any other way."

"There isn't any," I agreed.

And there wasn't.

* * *

1:00 Grierson, my analyst, came to give me a tranquilizer and stayed to look me over. He tried sounding me out about Karen. I told him I thought it would be best not to talk about the whole thing until later in the day when it was over. He sympathized and didn't press me.

He didn't seem worried that I might break the Code.

"With the training you fellows get for your job, it would be impossible for you to break the Code. Not by interference. You don't have to worry about that part of it."

Interference with the past was the worst offense an investigator could be guilty of. What has been known to happen cannot be changed. As things turn out, it's an unnecessary rule. No investigator could change the past if he wanted to. Non-interference was a law of nature.

But he could *make* it. For instance, buying and eating lunch would not be forbidden under the Code. Just being in the past and breathing the earlier air dislocates the universe some infinitesimal amount. But in exactly the same way that any other person dislocates it in his own time-scheme.

If Eric had really murdered Karen, I wouldn't have been able to do a thing to stop him. But since it could not have been Eric —since it had been myself that had killed her—there was nothing that could stop me either.

"I'm at your disposal anytime, Venner," Grierson said in parting. "You know how to get hold of me. If I can help, not as your analyst but as a friend, just tell me how."

Grierson would be helpful. When I returned. He had no suspicions of me at the moment, and I would see that he never did. I've had quite a lot of practice acting with Grierson, too.

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My life as a widower was all mapped out. A month's leave of absence to start off, which would include: one week of heavy drinking, one week of misanthropic withdrawal, and, after one of Grierson's sermons on the efficacy of travel, his great cure-all, a trip to my sister's home in California for two weeks. After I returned to work, I would be stoic and silent for a few months while I learned to savor my second bachelorhood. Altogether, a very plausible schedule.

1:20 In the Machine-room. By myself, I could relax for a moment. Only Lowell and I and the federal government's servicers are authorized to enter the room.

The facts of shifting are simple. You can shift back as much as eighteen hours. That seems to be a natural limit. You can't shift forward, so the Machines haven't killed the fortune-telling trade. Of course, it would be possible to relay information back through a series of Machines. I've heard the government does that in special cases. But for an investigator, it's strictly against the Code to let out anything about the future . . . even eighteen hours ahead. You just learn to keep your mouth shut.

As soon as the work is over you return to the station house. There's a special room for the investigators to return to. You wait there until you're back in the proper time-scheme again. The reason is simple: it would be slightly confusing for all involved (especially the investigator) to hand in a report on an as-yet-unheard-of crime. Like all the rules in the Code, it's designed to minimize paradoxes. As things are, an investigator can go crazy just thinking about his work.

Shifting is as easy as setting an alarm clock, once you know how to do it. The walls of the Machine-room are covered with all kinds of mechanical devices: dials, switches, buttons and keyboards. But all except one are dummies. If the wrong person got into the room, he couldn't do a thing. If he pushed one of the dummy buttons, he'd set off alarms through the whole building. It's a fool-proof system.

I set the Machine for eight-fifty and reset my watch accordingly. I had a half-hour to get to the apartment, but there was nothing to worry about. I'd get there on time. I'd seen that for myself.

And that was it—I had shifted back to the morning. When I left the station by a secret exit that opens directly to the street, it was 8:50 on the morning of Oct. 17, 2042. The sun was low in a crisp, blue, autumn sky.

"A beautiful morning," I thought to myself. "Too warm for October. Just right for me."

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9:15 I arrived at the apartment building and waited in the alcove at the foot of the stairs. There is a suspense in waiting for what must happen as well as one arising from uncertainties.

At last Irving Venner came down the stairs. I nodded to him. He walked past. I went up the stairs and waited for a moment at the second-floor landing. I heard the street door close. No uncomfortable sensations. None of the paranoia of the predestined. The man who had just left the building could have been a complete stranger—or a co-conspirator.

The door to the apartment was slightly ajar. I could hear Karen clearing away the breakfast dishes. I entered without knocking.

"Is someone there?" she asked without looking into the living room.

"Just me, honey. I changed into my blue suit but I forgot to take my wallet and keys from yesterday's pants. I found out when I got to the subway."

I went into the bedroom on my supposed errand.

"You're a fast one. You hardly left."

"You of all people, the wife of an investigator, should know about the subjective nature of time. You were day-dreaming."

She laughed delightedly. "Impostor! You didn't leave anything here. You're playing tricks."

That wasn't letter-perfect on my part, but if it was a slip it affected nothing. Karen had accepted my return.

I went into the bathroom and stayed there until Karen called.

"Is something wrong?"

"I've got a stomach cramp." I made some appropriate sounds to accompany the cramp.

"Bad?"

"It's murder."

"Why not stay home? The best cure is a rest cure."

"I may at that. It should go away in a minute."

"Go back to bed."

"If I do, call me at ten. I'll have to phone in."

I undressed and threw my clothes over a straight-back chair by the dresser. I got into my still-unmade bed and, quite without expecting to, I fell asleep. It must have been Grierson's tranquilizer.

9:55 I awoke with a start, thinking that I must have slept past the time to phone in. An irrational thought, because I had heard the call.

Karen looked in the bedroom door.

"You were resting so nicely, it seemed a shame to wake you. If you hadn't wakened just now, I would have phoned in for you. How are you feeling?"

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"Better," I said, "but feeling less than ever like going into the office. I wouldn't get there now until lunch time. How about our having lunch together at home today? Maybe we could get Eric to stop daubing his canvases long enough to have lunch with us."

"I can call and find out. Since we're taking him out tonight, he can hardly refuse."

She sat down beside me on the bed and dialed Eric's number. She sat close enough to me to allow me to hear them both. It occurred to me that that was a little risky for her. How would she know what Eric might say, not knowing that I could hear him?

Eric answered. "Hello."

"Hello, Eric. Karen here. Can you have lunch with us? Irving stayed home from work and he thinks it would be nice for the three of us to lunch together. I think so too."

"That makes three of us. What time?"

Karen has a real talent for intrigue. She'd warned him to be discreet as casually as that.

"What time, darling?" she asked turning to me.

"Make it eleven-thirty. I don't want to stay away from the office altogether."

So the appointment was made. Eric agreed to be here a little before eleven-thirty. Something was drastically wrong, because he shouldn't have. Eric had been poisoned—or would be—in his own loft. Not here.

It was already ten o'clock and I had no time for speculations. I had to call my office. I got rid of Karen (who might have noticed that I was dialing not the Chief's but my own number) by asking her to make some more coffee. This was really my day for coffee.

After one ring the phone was answered.

"Hello. Chief?" I said.

My own voice replied, "This is he."

For just a moment I felt odd. I hadn't been prepared for this new confrontation. At this moment I was sitting in my office at the station house, holding my hand over the earpiece of the telephone. The Paradox began to grip me. I tried hard to think of Continuity: anything that can be shifted has its own continuity. Every man has his own discreet time-scheme. They had drilled that into us every day at training school. But investigators still go crazy.

I avoided any further unpleasant thoughts of this sort by reciting my little fabrication loud enough for Karen to hear it in the kitchen. It was for her sake, after all, that I had devised these refinements. It was a short monologue, but at its end I did not immediately hang up. I

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wanted to say something to Irving Venner. Just what I don't know, a warning perhaps. But, whatever it might have been, it was something I had not heard earlier and I would not say now. I hung up.

There was one more detail to be arranged. I had Karen call the dry cleaner to make sure they would deliver my black suit in time for me to dress for the theatre. They said they'd have it here by 12:30.

Karen left for a short while to get groceries. While she was gone, I put on a bathrobe and placed in its pocket the tie I had taken from Eric's tie rack when I had last visited his loft.

* * *

11:00 When Karen returned with the groceries, she brought me the morning newspaper. She knows that I do the crossword puzzle. At this point it hardly seemed necessary to keep up appearances. Nevertheless, for the second time that day I worked the morning crossword. This time it took me only ten minutes. After that, I paced about the room uneasily and at last sat down on the sofa by the window. Outside it was growing overcast.

Karen had been in the bedroom straightening up. She came out, holding the jacket of my blue pin-stripe suit.

"How in the world did you get this so damp?" she asked.

I replied absent-mindedly, "I got caught in the rain."

She looked at me curiously. "But, darling, it hasn't been raining."

I looked at my watch. It was fifteen minutes after eleven. I had been careless but it would make no difference now.

"It hasn't yet, but it will any minute," I said in a bantering way.

She cocked her head to one side quizzically, like someone unable to understand the punch line of a joke. Without giving her time for reflection, I pulled her down onto the sofa with me. I kissed her hard on the mouth. Strange to say, at that moment, I desired her more passionately than I had for years. First she responded and then, abruptly, drew away from me.

This time it was my turn to look quizzical.

"Didn't you shave this morning?" she asked.

I knew what she was thinking. I had shaved that morning. By Karen's reckoning it would have been only three hours before. But it had actually been nine hours since I had shaved. The difference was noticeable, since I have a heavy beard. I didn't attempt to answer her.

She answered herself. "I know you did. I heard you."

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She rose from the sofa and went to stand by the window. Raindrops began to beat an irregular tattoo on the glass. The storm moved west to east across the city, and it had started to rain here ten minutes before it reached the station house.

The rainstorm unleashed all the terrors of the *déja vu* in me. Its coming seemed to press me to my deed, but now—so many things had gone wrong. It wasn't the matter of Eric. Rather, the details that I had left unaccounted for: my falling asleep, my four o'clock shadow before noon, and my wet jacket.

"You're right," Karen said. "It has begun to rain."

There was a longer pause, while the raindrops increased their tempo to a steady drone. I felt my resolution drain out of me, and the hollow it left in the pit of my stomach was filling up with the predestining rain. Contradictory thoughts and impulses raced through my mind: to kill her that minute and be done; how much I loved her in spite of . . . or perhaps it was only my own fantasies; I had no right or reason to think what I did of her; I *couldn't* kill her now. The certainty of her innocence seemed undoubtable.

And all this while she had been thinking too.

"You've shifted, Irving. Why didn't you tell me before?"

I made no reply. I put my hand in the pocket of my bathrobe. I felt the tie there.

"What are you doing here? Irving, it's against the Code for you to be here now!"

"If you'll come and sit down I'll explain."

SHE returned to the sofa but wouldn't sit near me. I moved closer to her. Now she had to die. She would soon have fit all the pieces together and reached her own conclusion. And she would have been right.

"You see, Karen, I am supposed to be here. I'm investigating a murder."

I put my arms around her suddenly so that she was unable to see the tie in my right hand.

"But . . ." Karen was a fast thinker. She didn't need to finish her sentence.

"Quite right, Karen—*your* murder. If you are interested I will even inform you who did it."

"Only tell me why. Why, in heaven's name, do you want to do such a thing?"

"Me, Karen! But I didn't do it." I listened to myself speak in amazement. My words seemed those of another man. "Eric did it. I overheard you arguing as I stood outside the door. For a long time he's wanted you to divorce me, but you always refused. You knew he wouldn't be able to support you as I can. You

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preferred to keep him as your lover. But he was too proud. At last, he preferred his own death —and yours. He strangled you with his tie."

I whipped the tie around her neck and pulled it tight, not so tight yet that she couldn't speak.

"You're wrong, Irving. You've made it all up. Eric is your own friend, your oldest friend. We've never done such a thing. You must believe me."

"How noble of you to try to protect him!"

Her eyes filled with terror. Her upper lip trembled and lifted to expose her long front teeth.

"The phone call I made . . . that's why you wanted him to come."

"After Eric killed you he poisoned himself. He has trouble, you know, in his loft with the rats. It's an old building. Knowing that no murderer can escape the penalty of the law, he took rat poison. Here in our own kitchen."

She made a sudden attempt to escape from me, but the tie was wrapped tightly about her neck and I held it firmly. In her struggle she fell from the sofa. I stood over her and tightened the loop of the tie slowly about her neck. She tried to pull it away. Her hands flailed about trying to reach me, but, since I stood behind and above her, she was unable to see what she was doing. At last her body became limp. After another minute of tension, I relaxed my grip.

I carried Karen's body to the bedroom, where Eric would not see it if he came. Her face looked like a stranger's. Her eyes dilated with terror and her hair in disarray. Her mouth was open and her small chin was pulled in almost to her neck. Her upper lip was still drawn up and exposed her teeth and pink gums. It was an expression that made her look stupid, and I felt sad. I brushed my hand over her eyes to close them, but there was nothing I could do to keep her lip down over her teeth.

11:30 There was no point in waiting for Eric to show up. For some reason he had been delayed at his loft. I found a hip flask in the dresser that I had saved from college days and filled it with whiskey into which I had dissolved the rat poison. I put my blue suit back on and took an umbrella from the apartment. That wasn't interference, nor would it look suspicious to the Chief. I could tell him that Eric, on leaving after the murder, had not closed the door, that I had come in to see exactly what had happened and had taken the umbrella in order to be less conspicuous when following Eric through the streets in the rain.

Eric lived only a few blocks

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away. His loft was near a section of docks that had fallen out of use. That area was fairly isolated. The rain was coming down so steadily now that you could only see a few yards in front of you. The people hurried through the downpour, intent on their own business, and paid no attention to me. In that one respect, the storm was of some service.

ONCE out on the street, the cold air and the refreshing sound of the rain cleared the cobwebs from my head. I felt renewed in my purpose and wondered how I could have gotten so fuddled in those last few minutes with Karen.

The ground floor shop of Eric's building was an art gallery operated by Eric and some of his artist friends. It was closed. A sign in the window said: PATRONIZE YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD ART GALLERY. Eric's idea. Beside it was a painting that Karen and I had posed for. A beautiful representation of Karen. (It made *me* look more portly than I really am.) The picture brought back to my mind the figure, so different from this, that I had left in the bedroom, and I hurried past.

Eric lived four floors up. Luck was with me and the narrow, smelly hallway was empty. Eric's door was closed. I knocked lightly. There was no reply. I knocked again. And a third time.

A fat woman in a flowered housedress, whom I recognized as the wife of the building's superintendent, came to the landing of the third floor. Eric paid her to do his cleaning, and she had often seen me in his loft or in the gallery.

"You looking for Mr. Hubbler?" she called up.

"Yes," I answered faintly, hoping that in the poor light of the hallway she would not be able to recognize me.

"You won't find him here today, Mr. Venner. He had an accident out on the street just a few minutes ago. Don't think he was hurt much at all, but the police took him to the hospital."

I stood there speechless. The worst thing (though I did not remember it until I was outside again) was that she had recognized me. She even knew my name. But, after all, that made little difference and it wasn't the worst thing.

"It's this rain," she went on. "Mr. Hubler had just come out of the house and started across the street when a taxi turned around the corner. Didn't see him till too late and he slid right into him when he tried to brake. My husband saw the whole thing out of the window. You wanted to leave something for him?"

I reflected, fingering the flask in my pocket. He could never be blamed for the murder now.

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He'd been seen leaving the house at just that time.

"No. No thank you. I'll see him later."

I went down the stairs slowly and walked past her. My state of mind must have been apparent.

"I wouldn't look so upset Mr. Venner. He wasn't hurt bad at all."

"It's just the shock."

I left the building in a daze and stood for a long time watching the rain pour down over Karen's smiling face in the window of the gallery. Then I walked for some blocks in the rain.

* * *

12:25 This last and total miscarriage of my plan left me without apparent resources. I turned over all the possibilities and they added up to zero.

Then I hit upon something; it was a desperate gamble and it was the ultimate defiance of the Code. I would interfere. There was still time to prevent that morning's disaster. But not much. I hailed a cab and gave the driver twenty dollars to take me to the cafeteria near the station house as fast as he could go. I had ten minutes to get there and warn myself not to use the Machine.

As the cab speeded along the wet streets, I sat back and tried to imagine what would be the result if I succeeded. Would that whole day be swept into oblivion, erased? Would all the people who had been involved in my plan pass through a different time-scheme? Most of all, what would happen to me?

Yet my greatest worry was not so intangible. One cannot long worry about what cannot be imagined. I dreaded lest my present attempt was a sheer impossibility. *Non-interference is a law of nature.*

The taxi pulled up across the street from the cafeteria. I ran out into the rain, leaving my umbrella behind in the taxi. I was halfway across the street, when the taxi-driver called out after me, "Hey, mister, you left your umbrella."

"Keep it," I shouted back. That moment I was attacked by a sudden flash of giddiness. I braced myself against it and looked up in time to see Irving Venner coming out of the cafeteria. He paused a moment in the doorway, looking out at the rain. I stared at him until he met my gaze. He stepped backward in amazement.

I felt nothing but an iron determination to carry through my scheme. I was interfering. I had already altered the past; this had not happened before.

I approached him.

"Don't do this," he said. "You

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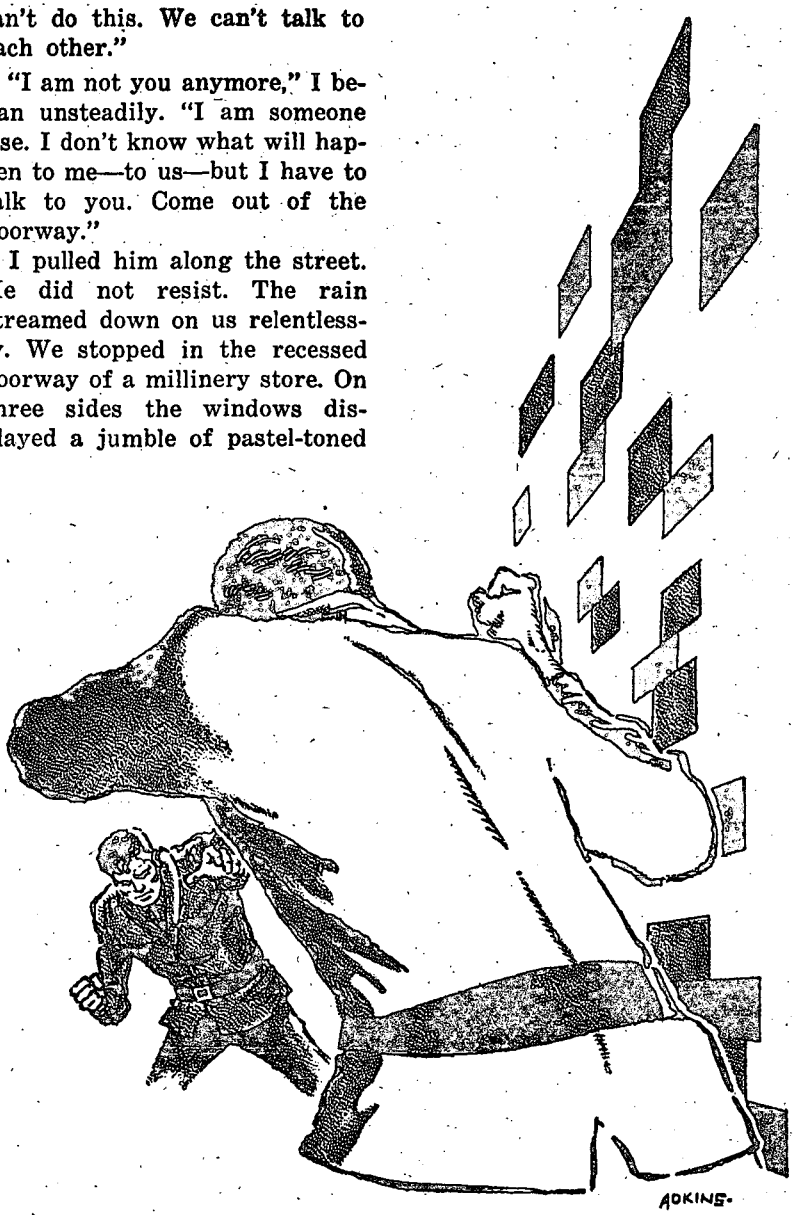
can't do this. We can't talk to each other."

"I am not you anymore," I began unsteadily. "I am someone else. I don't know what will happen to me—to us—but I have to talk to you. Come out of the doorway."

I pulled him along the street. He did not resist. The rain streamed down on us relentlessly. We stopped in the recessed doorway of a millinery store. On three sides the windows displayed a jumble of pastel-toned



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synthetic fabrics draped on headless, armless torsoes.

"You can't use the Machine today. There was an accident. I've just been through the most horrible . . ."

I could not go on. I had started laughing hysterically.

"What are you doing? You've been back?"

"It went all wrong. Eric never came. He was in an accident. He was on his way to the hospital at the moment that I was killing her. The Chief told you about it as you went out. And I was seen at his loft afterwards."

He had become somewhat calmer.

"Karen is dead?"

"Yes. I didn't know then about Eric. But *you* must not go back. You must not kill her."

Suddenly his eyes lit with rage. He began striking at me with his doubled fists. "You interfering fool! You madman!"

I had not expected this. I tried to fend him off. My only hope was that he would listen to reason.

"I had no choice," I said, when I had at last restrained him. "Don't you see. Everything has gone wrong. It was either this or suicide."

He tore away from me with a mighty effort.

"Then you should have killed yourself. God knows what will happen now."

I could feel the laughter bubbling up in me again.

"Irving," I said, "try to . . ."

But when he heard me use his name, he lashed out at me again and nearly threw me off my balance. I ceased thinking or trying to talk to him. I hit back as hard as I could. He toppled backward into the store window, which shattered into a lethal rain of glass. A huge shard pierced his neck. He screamed and was silent. I looked down at him in horror. He was dead.

Outside the recess, the rain was still pouring and the street was empty.

I was dead. It was impossible that I could be alive. Who I had been lay dead at my feet in a pool of blood. I understood what I had to do. The predestining force seemed at that moment to have engineered a comedy. I had still to perform its last absurdity.

I took the flask of poisoned whiskey from my pocket. At least, I thought, this will not be wasted. Eddies of horror, like sheets of rain sweeping along the street, passed over me as I tried to think my way through what had just happened. Death, then, seemed benign. I drank from the flask.

* * *

Later: But it was not over. In the next instant of memory I

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was in the bedroom of my apartment. I looked at the alarm clock. The alarm had been pushed in, and Karen had left her bed and was puttering around in the kitchen. I wanted to scream. Instead, I said, "Good morning, honey. What's it like out?"

She looked in smiling. "A beautiful morning. Too warm for October. Just right for me."

I seemed to have no control over my actions. I got up and went into the bathroom and began to shave. I tried to understand what was happening. A flash of wild hope: my interference had worked. When I went downstairs, the last trace of that hope died. For there in the alcove behind the staircase stood Irving Venner. He nodded to me. I walked on.

And so it has been. Every action of that day was repeated without the slightest alteration. Again I had to go to the Machine-room, again be shifted to the morning, again return to the apartment, and again strangle Karen. What had been horrible then was now unspeakable. Right up to the moment that Irving Venner lay dead at my feet.

I understand what has happened, why I must go through this day again and again.

Non-interference is a law of nature. I could not have warned myself that afternoon of what was going to happen. When the taxi-driver called me back and I grew dizzy, my long training to be an investigator asserted itself in time to prevent me from committing the ultimate crime of interference. What I imagined to follow that fainting spell is the punishment my own mind has invented for my crimes.

And I must sit now in some hospital cell (for madmen are not allowed the mercy of an execution), a catatonic, incessantly repeating the experiences of that day.

THE END

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ANY QUESTIONS?

By LEO P. KELLEY

Illustrator ADKINS

Philosophers through the ages have wondered if human nature is capable of change, of growth. Here is a vivid, bitter statement of the negative.

Mirak'luth—7th cycle, 236th rek

Slowly and sluggishly the life fluid surges through its vast network of pliable channels, and Lirin feels consciousness returning, the chill lifting. He rears up on muscular hind legs and

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stretches his tubular body. The glass door of his cubicle swings wide and he emerges, reverting once again to the more comfortable quadruped posture of the Mirak'luthians. He checks the dials on the adjoining rows of glass-walled cubicles, makes some alterations on the one enclosing Sredna and waits. When Sredna emerges sleepily, Lirin speaks of checking the videoscan and its memory banks. Sredna agrees between yawns. Stasis ending is like the slow coming of day.

The memory banks continue to record the same story. The new facts registering confirm the earlier speculations and hypotheses of the scientists, Sredna and Lirin.

Lirin wonders aloud, "Is it time? Now?"

Sredna checks further and nods.

As planned in much earlier cycles, Sredna makes the long-awaited preparations. He gathers himself to himself and pushes and pats with strong thoughts the atoms composing his body, progressing gradually to humanoid and finally to human form.

The ship waits at the end of the graded ramp. Through the icy wasteland beyond the airlock, beneath the thin rays of Mirak'luth's rapidly dying sun, Sredna walks to it.

Lirin returns to the stasis chamber as the ship slips away into the sky containing the pale, nearly lifeless sun. He resets the dials, enters his cubicle and closes the door. To wait.

* * *

Hong Kong—October 15th, 1969

Sing Soo Lee, in happier days called Son of the Lotus but now scorned and reviled and named Consorter with Dragons, sits in squalor at the edge of the teeming city. The scrawny dogs avoid him and the occasional tourists look selfconsciously away toward the tops of temples, pretending Sing Soo Lee does not exist, denying the reality of his skinny outstretched beggar's claw, an affront to their sensitive eyes. Sing Soo Lee moans pitifully with the ease of long practice. His eyelids narrow, almost hiding the calculating pupils, dark pits between the layers of yellow flesh.

He watches warily as a fat man approaches. Sing Soo Lee sees the man smile up at the hot sun blazing down from a cloudless sky. Sing Soo Lee whines deep in his throat and thrusts out his hand, rocking sadly to and fro. The fat man sees him, shakes his head and clucks sorrowfully. He speaks to Sing Soo Lee, sits beside him in the dust and listens as Sing Soo theatri-

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cally curses the fate that has reduced him to this, a beggar, lower even than the lice that infest him, most despised of men. Sing Soo hangs his head and weeps noisily, wondering all the while about the possible fatness of the fat man's wallet. The man removes a glowing green stone from his vest pocket and offers it to Sing Soo Lee along with some startling words which cause the beggar to quiver with anticipation. Can it be true?

Marseilles—October 16th, 1969

A secretary mechanically punches pastel buttons on one after the other of her three plastoid desk computers, idly arguing with a paunchy little man. No one, she tells him, can see Mr. Delacroix without an appointment. No one ever sees Mr. Delacroix without an appointment. No. Definitely not. The fat man wrings his hands and pleads. He flatters. He sits down to wait. The secretary glides out to lunch and the man boldly enters the office of Mr. Delacroix, world-renowned manufacturer of machines.

"Who—?" roars Mr. Delacroix.

"Please—," says the fat man, cringing.

"Get out!" bellows Mr. Delacroix.

The visitor quickly removes a red, many-faceted object from the briefcase he carries and sets it shimmering in the center of Mr. Delacroix's desk.

"—amazing properties," Mr. Delacroix hears his caller say.

There is more and the fat man tells it hastily, his words bubbling out from between full lips.

"You mean all I have to do is *think* of something?" Mr. Delacroix asks incredulously. "Think about it and this—this thing here—will create it? Out of thin air?" Delacroix feels the impulse to laugh and feels it cancelled by the goading of greed. Crazy maybe, he thinks. But, if true, the thing, whatever it is, could have amazing possibilities.

The fat man assures Mr. Delacroix that it is all quite true. "Sir," he petitions, "try it. Think of something."

Mr. Delacroix thinks and the stone throbs, flaring scarlet, possessing, it seems, a life of its own. Mr. Delacroix splutters wetly as neatly stacked piles of francs materialize on the polished surface of his desk beside the shining stone.

"Can it get rid of things?" Mr. Delacroix manages to mutter weakly. "You know, *destroy* them?"

"No," says the visitor, shaking his head. "It can merely create. But think of the possibilities! Food for the hungry, clothes for the needy, shelter for—."

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Mr. Delacroix frowns, thinks.

"Can you help me distribute my invention?" asks the little man wistfully. "I am not wise in the ways of business," he adds, his eyes cast down in pretended embarrassment.

Mr. Delacroix fondles francs. He places them in his desk drawer and walks around the desk to rest many-ringed, paternal fingers on the fat man's shoulders.

"You came to the right place," he says. "You came to the one man in all of France who can help you."

Mr. Delacroix talks enthusiastically of contracts and percentages, of assembly lines and raw materials.

The fat man listens attentively. Leaves finally, convinced that the prospects picked are proving eminently satisfactory.

Soho—October 17th, 1969

A man dressed in a white woolen robe that reaches to his bare feet parades through the foggy night carrying a sign which reads: *Watch and wait. The time comes.*

Beneath the robe his corpulence is barely noticeable. He moves from one corner to the next and preaches in a high wail, eyes ablaze, as the crowd stumbles past and around him, ebbing and flowing, intent on its own pursuits but tolerant.

Sophie Pendleton, arrayed in red high heels and a too-tight satin sheath, pauses beside him, dismissing him with a perfunctory glance. She fumbles with a match. He smiles kindly at her and beckons. She is about to walk on but she hesitates. Something about the smile. He gestures again and she follows him past shuttered shops and into an alley. Still smiling, the prophet draws forth from the folds of his robe a blue bauble and Sophie reaches for it instinctively. He withdraws his hand and then explains carefully, watching her eyes widen and her mouth open to form a crimson O.

"Use it, child, as you see fit," he says, adding a further word or two about the wonders waiting. He is delighted by the avarice flooding her eyes. "I give it you," he whispers. "Gratis."

Not quite believing, Sophie nevertheless seizes the glistening orb and flees from the alley without once looking back, her high heels sending back splinters of sound to greet the white-robed prophet's barely stifled laughter.

New York City—October 18th, 1969

The street noises diminish as the crowed-faced man wanders deeper into Central Park, humming an oddly unmusical tune, heading toward what he knows awaits him. The sound of his footsteps punctures the darkness

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as he strolls idly along the paths winding between the looming rocks. Moving into the puddle of light cast by a street lamp, the portly pedestrian hesitates as leather-jacketed Mike Carmody steps suddenly out of the night onto the path ahead, his boot buckles catching the light, glittering. Like the snub-nosed gun he holds in his right hand. He gestures and the fat man shrinks from menace, hands fluttering in front of him in simulated nervousness.

"Please—," he cries.

Carmody's feline face twists and his lips part, displaying yellowed teeth. He snarls a command.

The fat man has no money. "But here," he whimpers. "Here's something. Take it. Don't shoot!" he pleads.

A yellow stone appears in the fat man's shaking palm, shining like remembered sunlight.

Carmody seizes it and manipulates it sceptically with nail-gnawed fingers. "What's this?" he asks suspiciously.

The fat man eagerly explains.

A swift glance along the deserted path and Carmody risks a hasty test. Delight flickers across his face as the imagined second gun suddenly appears in his jacket pocket. He hurtles down the midnight path to disappear among the rocks and motionless trees.

South Africa—October 19th, 1969

After a trek of many hours across the veldt, the fat man discovers a cluster of mud huts. He seeks and finds the medicine man. And leaves a gift.

San Quentin—October 19th, 1969.

A heavily jowled man of the cloth visits a condemned killer in Death Row. Instead of reading words of wisdom or reciting psalms he tells the slack-jawed murderer on the cot beside him a strange story about the sparkling object he tosses carelessly from hand to hand. Fifteen minutes later he departs. The stone remains.

Mirak'luth—7th cycle, 239th rek

The fleshy figure of a man emerges jubilantly from his ship and climbs the ramp without glancing at the sky or giving a thought to the frozen landscape surrounding him. He enters the airlock and proceeds through it to the inner chamber where he resumes his normal form, dropping with relief to all fours, before replenishing the magnotapes in the videoscan and stepping into the cubicle he so recently left. Stasis.

* * *

Hong Kong—October 19th, 1969

Sing Soo Lee recovers slowly

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and clumsily struggles to his feet. Empty bottles of rice wine lie scattered in the sour-smelling hallway in which he finds himself. Groaning, clutching his stomach, Sing Soo Lee is sick in the gutter.

Recovering finally, he heads toward the center of town and the house of Foo Lin, stealer of wives and a man's good name.

Sing Soo Lee sits pondering outside Foo Lin's garden. His eyes light up and he suppresses a chuckle. He holds the stone tightly and closes his eyes.

Crash! A lion rages through the flowers and pauses on the miniature bridge spanning the clear garden pool. It throws back its head and roars. A tiger in the tree overhead replies.

Sing Soo leaves, hurrying down the street with his stone. Revenge, he thinks with pleasure, is his at last. Revenge against Foo Lin and the former Madame Lee and against all those who turned from him or spat or slammed doors in his face.

His hands tighten on the stone as he fills the street with stampeding elephants. He laughs hysterically as the scream of the trampled people soar up to mingle with the vultures he has sent to flood the sky.

Marseilles—October 28th, 1969

Mr. Delacroix listens politely to the anxious representatives of the French government. Yes, he assures them, he will be glad to cooperate, do all he can during the current crisis. "Disastrous!" he exclaims.

"Tragic!" corrects an aide hurriedly. The support of respected businessmen like Mr. Delacroix is badly needed, it is emphasized.

"Total economic collapse!" groans a bespectacled accountant.

"Where is all the money coming from?" a third man wonders aloud. "It's ruining the country!"

Mr. Delacroix frowns in false sympathy as he ushers the delegation to the door. He returns to the window to confront gathering storm clouds. No matter, he tells himself facetiously. "I have much more than enough for a rainy day!"

Soho—November 1, 1969

Sophie fondles Chester's head resting in her lap. He grins up at her.

"That makes, let's see," she says, counting, "that makes *seventeen* crates of the very best champagne!"

"Lemme have it now, Sophie," Chester says. "It's my turn again."

She reluctantly surrenders the stone.

One after another, faster than

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the eye can follow or the mind can count, pairs of gaudy diamond cufflinks materialize. Soon they litter the bare floor.

"Wowie!" exclaims Chester with delight.

"Let's make us a lil ol' jet!" suggests Sophie

"A rip snorter of a space ship!" Chester volunteers.

"Off we go," sings Sophie, "into the wild blue yonder—."

Chester pours more champagne. Tonight he'll do it. Tonight he'll kill silly Sophie. When the stone is his—then watch out world! Diamond cuff links are all well and good but—.

New York City—November 3rd, 1969

Mike Carmody no longer wears a leather jacket. A natural shoulder suit accents the boniness of his spare frame as he barks directions to the men gathered in his hotel suite.

"Benny, you set things up in Chicago. Detroit's yours, Lester. And Bat, start working on the international link-up."

"Mr. Carmody," ventures a sallow-faced man in a corner of the room. "Mr. Carmody, we're all set to start in Kansas."

"Good boy. Like I said, we'll make it a clean sweep; burn the wheat fields in Kansas, spray poison on the citrus groves, and so on. You've all got your orders. You've got all the money you need." He laughs. "When the food's gone the government goes. When the government goes, I'll produce the food. When I produce the food, I'll run the government. I'll *be* the government! OK. Beat it, you guys!"

The group disbands. A husky voice remarks, "The land of plenty, that's what it's turnin' out to be. Like milk and honey."

Mike Carmody smiles. Let the dummies have the money, he thinks. Just let him have the power. And he will have it, he vows, thanks to the old fool in the Park. More power than even twenty, thirty guns could get him.

Czechoslovakia, Iceland, Australia, India, Capri—December 8th, 1969

Riots rage. Economies strangle. Murders multiply. The stones change hands. Again and again.

Earth—March 10th, 1970

Chaos.

* * *

Mirak'luth—7th cycle, 241st rek

The videoscan records and stores data in its complex memory banks. Outside the stasis chamber the ground lies frozen and the sun dims noticeably as the seventh cycle becomes the eighth. Lirin, Sredna and the few thousand remaining surviv-

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ors on dying Mirak'luth sleep in the silence of stasis.

New York City—November 6th, 1970

The deserted streets echo to the cries of another roving band of marauders. And the crackle of their rifle fire. A man races in terror down the dark ribbon of Broadway and leaps into a subway entrance. He emerges hesitantly hours later. "I only wanted to join up with you," he whispers aloud to the empty silence shrouding the city. He shakes a frightened fist at an oblivious sky. He stumbles on amid the rubble of Forty-Second Street, tears streaming down his face, alone.

Mirak'luth—8th cycle, 2nd rek

The time locks snap and the glass doors of the coffin-like cubicles open. Life stirs within the occupants of the frosted containers. Sredna steps out. Lirin follows. Together they check the videoscan tapes as the others join them and wait breathlessly, hopefully.

Sredna speaks.

"Our many cycles of analyzing and observing the planet and its people have borne fruit. They use the gifts we gave them as it was predicted they would. Our new home awaits us!"

* * *

New Mirak'luth—16th cycle, 119th rek

"No," says the teaching female to the young one clinging to her pelt.

"Not *ferior*. *In*ferior. The former inhabitants of our New Mirak'luth were an inferior species."

"What happened to them?" pipes a second young one, clicking his claws together.

"All of you set your tapes at the ninth revolution," she instructs.

They listen.

—and a pestilence claimed the land. By the middle of the second rek of the eighth cycle, the entire populace had perished. For further facts, refer to Nature, Human.

"Any questions?" asks the teaching female. **THE END**

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NOR IRON BARS A CAGE

By RON GOULART

Illustrator SUMMERS

Frank Perry did not think much about the problem of True Justice in an automated society until he was faced with execution. And he was the warden!

HIS bed gently awakened him and his bedroom window cleared to show him the morning sun bright on the yellow fields outside. As the room got him ready for work Frank Perry glanced across the fields at Barnum Automatic Prison #74. The low rambling buildings, with their shingled roofs and complementary colors, weren't so bad. It was a pleasant enough prison and the automatic Control Center guaranteed that no one would escape.

Frank had been Warden at #74 for nearly a year now. Before that he had worked in the capital of this territory and before that he'd been in college on Gamaliel, the second largest planet in the Barnum group. He'd taken the Warden Examinations half out of curiosity, not expecting to make a significant score. But the grading android had said Frank's score was one of the highest it had ever seen. So here Frank was.

Except for the prisoners he was the only human being in the prison. Sometimes he got a little unsettled at not having anyone to talk to. Frank figured he'd serve out two years as Warden and then try for another branch of the Prison Bureau. Publicity maybe.

He was fed and then transported to the front porch. A warm wind cut across the fields and as Frank rode the flagstones to the prison he felt at ease and content.

Lately a girl from Galachand, the wing of the Multiuniversal Good Service Foundation, had taken to dropping in at his office

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every Sunday. As an accredited officer in Galachand she had entry privileges at the prison, including her own byword. She even had access to the Termination Area, where no other visitor was allowed.

Frank had watched one execution on his monitors in the office. Now he kept the termination screen covered with an old memo. The Inspector from the capital rarely got out here to #74.

The Galachand girl, June Renfrow, took Frank's masking of the execution screen as a sign that he, too, was not satisfied with the prison system on Barnum. That wasn't so. He just didn't like to watch.

THE termination apparatus was used about once a week, usually on Mondays. In fact, there'd been an execution yesterday at the usual hour. As Warden Frank had nothing to do with it. It was all automatic.

For someone with such a high warden aptitude Frank wondered why he didn't enjoy executions more. The other 400 monitor screens didn't bother him. He checked each one at least twice a day to see what all the prisoners were up to. In the months he'd been Warden they hadn't been up to much. Only one escape try, and seeing the leaders disintegrated on the spot had discouraged their escape drives.

At the outside door to the Warden's office the moving path stopped. Frank moved closer to the door and, in a low voice, said, "Full many a flower is born to blush unseen."

The door slid open and he was in the anteroom. "I am monarch of all I survey," he said. The far door slid back.

His office was a shade too warm. Sitting at his desk Frank said, "Abou Ben Adhem (may his tribe increase!)." The room whirred briefly and then cooled.

Mornings were easy. He had to read two chapters in Honeyball's *Modern Automatic Penology* and then check his monitors. Despite what June Renfrow said the prisons were run pretty well. For instance, Frank only had to send out a report once every two weeks. June liked to call the capital the red tape center of Barnum. One report every two weeks, though, wasn't a lot of paper work.

Frank reached for his copy of Honeyball. He knocked over a cup of hot coffee. He moved back as the sponget buzzed down off its shelf and squeezed up the puddle. Frank located the clock face in among the monitors. His first coffee break wasn't due for nearly a half hour yet. Something made a grinding sound.

The sponget was trying to climb in the coffee spiggot. Frank grabbed as it was disap-

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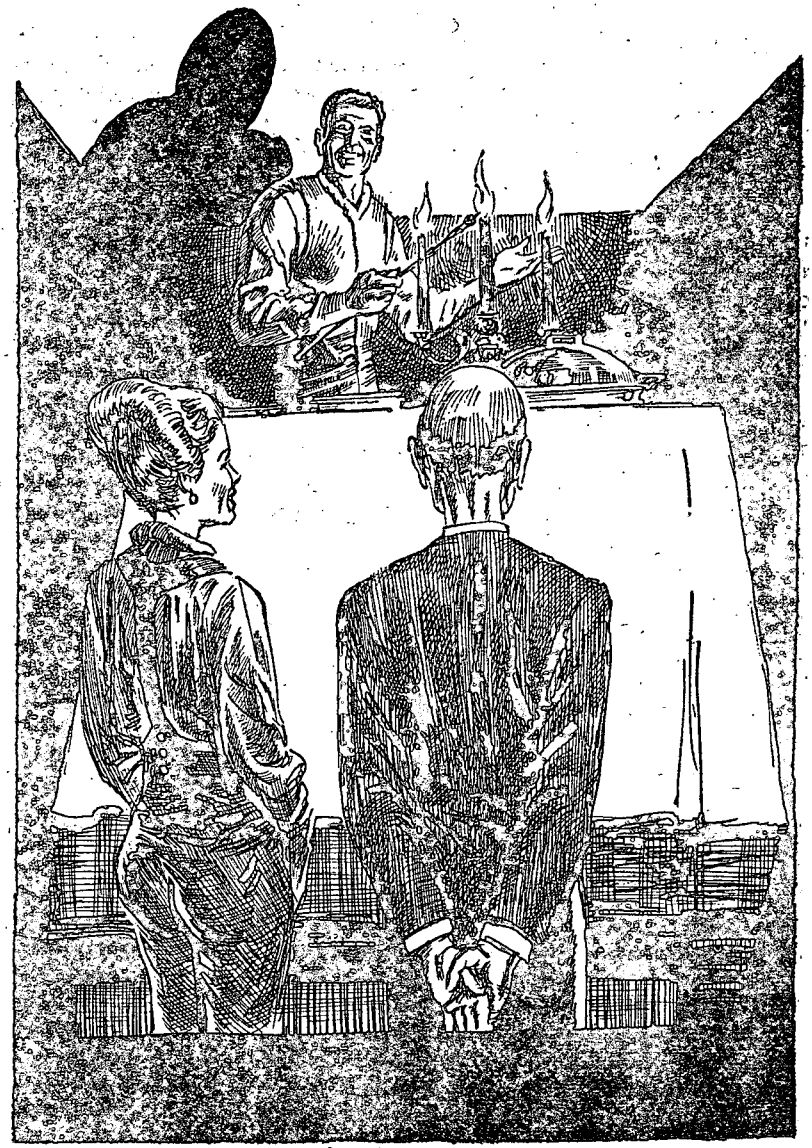

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pearing and yanked. The sponget came out and then more coffee. The new cup was a fraction late and it caught only part of the coffee. The auxiliary sponge shot over and landed in the mess.

Frank got his checklist and decided to go over the monitors ahead of time. All the prisoners in the Robbery Wing were playing cards. No trouble there.

THE Propaganda Wing was quiet, too. They had individual rooms there, so games were out. Something. Frank looked at his checklist. Room #2032 in the Propaganda Wing was occupied by Rasmussen, the twice convicted Philosophical Agrarian. Rasmussen was there all right, sitting on his quilted bed and working on his scale model of the prison. But something was missing. Rasmussen saved the red plastic ribbons that came on the soup cracker package. He'd had a ball of them nearly three feet in diameter in one corner of his room. The ball was gone.

Frank got a guardmike out of the pigeonhole cabinet and plugged it in the Propaganda Wing slot.

"O'Hara here," said the red faced android who stepped in front of the guard monitor.

"Where's Rasmussen's ball of red plastic ribbons?"

"He stuffed it down the dispoze hole just after dawn this morning, sir. Made an awful racket."

"Well, keep up the good work O'Hara."

There was nothing happening on any of the other screens. Frank signed the checklist and crossed back to his desk. There were eleven cups of coffee sitting in a circle beneath the spigot.

Frank went to the control panel and pushed the Custodian button. He hoped there wasn't anything seriously wrong. Up above the control panel, where he could reach it only by standing on his desk chair, was a small clear door. Behind the door was a red switch. In case of an absolute emergency Frank was to speak a special phrase and the door would open. Then he was to throw the switch. It turned off the whole prison. An all out enemy attack, a full scale revolution or a complete breakdown of everything and he was to go for that switch.

Every time something went wrong, even something minor like the coffee business, it bothered Frank. He didn't want his record to give the impression that he couldn't run a tight prison.

A corridor door slid open and two android guards rolled up to him. They didn't look like Custodians.

"Come along with you now," said one.

"McGinnis?" said Frank. "Get

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back to your wing." He looked at the other andy guard. "You, too, Sweeney."

"Tick tick," said Sweeney and his left eye fell shut.

McGinnis swung out with his club and Frank fell against Sweeney. Frank tried to right himself but he was tangled up with the ticking Sweeney and before he could rise McGinnis hit him again and he blacked out.

* * *

FRANK pushed himself up to his knees in the center of the room. He hooked his fingers over the arm of a chair and clutched up to a standing position. The chair was a soft cushioned one and Frank let himself sit in it, with his head carefully back.

"About Ben Ahdem," he shouted, jumping up. He'd recognized the chair and the matching sofa. And the framed paintings of pastoral scenes on some long forgotten planet.

This was the Termination Suite.

"Full many a flower is born to blush unseen," Frank called out.

The room crackled faintly.

"About Ben Ahdem (may his tribe increase!)."

The Nondenominational Priest Android came up through the floor.

"I am the master of my fate," Frank said. "I am monarch of all I survey."

"In times like these," said the Nondenominational Priest Android, "we must turn to others for help."

"I'm the Warden," said Frank. "I'm trying to get out of here so I can get this place running again."

"Sit down, young man. We'll have a chat. There's no need for anxiety. You are not logged in to depart for almost a week."

Frank watched the android. "Who am I?"

"The question of personal identity and survival has long perplexed many philosophers."

"Who do you think I am? My name."

"Ned Elven, the Conservative Butcher," said the android. "Known reactionary and suspected assassin of six Liberal Industrialists."

Frank said, "My name is Frank Perry. I'm a registered Urbanist. I'm the Warden of Barnum Automatic Prison #74. Now Rasmussen put all that plastic ribbon down the dispoze hole and something's on the fritz. Not being a technician I can't say what. But, for instance, my coffee spiggot produced a dozen cups of coffee."

"You believe in miracles then?"

"I believe that when I pushed the Custodian button it summoned two guards instead and they got me by mistake, assum-

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ing that I was Ned Elven. Because things got on the blink, you see. Ned Elven is probably still in Cell #2036 right now."

"Can you give me a little broader hint? I'm trying to zero in on your faith."

"I'm so used to the routine here that I don't carry any sort of ID. The bywords and passwords take care of all that. My papers are back in my cottage. But I'm the Warden."

"Now, now," said the android. It patted Frank on the arm.

"Hey!" Frank fell into his chair. The android had given him some kind of tranquilizing injection.

NOW," said the Nondenominational android as it pulled a straight chair up near Frank. "Don't let me offend you in any way. I'm here to comfort you. Now how about good and evil? We get such a range of people here I have to be very cautious."

"Good and evil," said Frank. He fought against relaxing.

"I was going to suggest that if you went in for a theory such as that you wouldn't feel so badly. You have committed an evil act and it's a good thing that they're going to punish you." The android opened its tunic. Across its chest were six rows of a dozen labeled buttons each. "You can pick any of the major creeds. Perhaps that would be better. I don't mind telling you this is a real corker for me, trying to pin you down."

"I'm the Warden. I'm the Warden," Frank said. He had meant to shout but it didn't work out.

"Yes, of course,"

"Fine. Take me back to my office now and I'll get things under control."

"Is yours a religion based on economics possibly? The office image is recurrent."

"You don't want to be scrapped?" Frank's hands would not function and he couldn't get a grip on the chair arms and pull himself up. "You'll have to carry me to the office."

"Carry me to the office," said the android. It clapped its hands. "You start and I'll join in. Sounds like a splendid hymn, though I don't have it on file." It stopped clapping and pushed a button on its side. "There. I'll memorize it."

Frank lunged. He stood and then fell beyond standing. He dropped on his face on the thick rugged floor.

"I think I'm getting it," said the android, dropping down next to Frank. "You're still a little jumpy in your new environment. I'll return tomorrow." He gave Frank another pat.

* * *

DINNER was on time. Frank watched it slide out of the

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wall. The meal servers were rigged to freeze anybody who grabbed at the panel while it was open and serving. No use trying that.

Frank could move pretty well now and when the serving cart rolled up to him he was able to use the utensils and eat the dinner.

After the room took the dishes away Frank began shouting his passwords again. Apparently they only worked in and around his Warden's office.

Well, you couldn't really blame the Prison Bureau. No one would expect a Warden to end up in the Termination Suite. So they hadn't provided him with a word for getting out. All Wardens had orders to monitor executions. They were on no occasion to watch one in person.

Frank jumped up. "They're going to do it in a few days."

Obviously there was a simple way to get a message out. And probably by now the malfunctioning of #74 was known of in the capital. Still #74 was just a little off. Maybe it had repaired itself by now.

When Frank's report didn't show up there would be concern.

"You sent it in three days ago," he said aloud. "Nobody will be expecting one again for a week and a half. And the execution is set for Monday."

It was ridiculous. He laughed.

In a smooth automatic operation like this they wouldn't execute a Warden by mistake.

Was it a mistake?

Maybe nothing was really wrong with Barnum Automatic Prison #74. Maybe he was actually the one they wanted to terminate.

No, the capital didn't settle personnel matters this way. Especially not with someone who got one of the highest scores the grading android had ever seen on the Warden test.

Frank sat hunched and thoughtful until the room put him to sleep for the night.

* * *

IT was Friday. The Nondenominational Priest Android had reminded him of that.

Frank was standing against the sofa and the andy had pushed a chair up close to him. "There now," it said, "simply relax and tell me your earliest recollection."

"I pushd the button for the Custodians and instead the Guards came."

"And how old were you at this time?"

"Twenty eight," said Frank. "This was just a few days ago." He reached out to grab the android's arm.

The andy recoiled. "No con-

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tact, please. It's not allowed."

"The point is I'm not guilty of anything. I'm the Warden of the prison here. It's going to look funny to the capital if #74 slips up and terminates its own Warden."

"I've played back all the memories I have of our little gabfests. This one motif is quite prevalent. So much so that I have done something about it."

Frank grinned. "Fine. That's what I've been telling you to do."

"I sent a memo."

"To who?"

"To whom. To the Bishop-In-Chief of the Nondenominational Priest Androids. Should he see anything out of the ordinary in your story he will in turn contact the proper authorities."

"How'd you send the memo?"

"I mailed it."

Frank closed his eyes. "The regular mail?"

"Yes."

"They only pick that up once a week."

"Yes. Every Monday."

"Fine." Frank circled around the android. "You've made a mistake. Automatic Prison #74 has made a mistake."

"That's not possible," said the android, turning and rising to move toward Frank.

"No more shots," said Frank, backing.

"You must relax. We don't want you shuffling off this mortal coil with a case of the heebie jeebies."

"I want to see the Warden."

"Negative. The Warden never visits the Termination Area."

"You know the Warden?"

"His name is Frank Perry," said the android. "I have never had the pleasure of meeting him."

"I'm the Warden."

"No, you're Ned Elven." The android reached for him.

"I want to see a social worker."

The android stopped. "I hope you're not unhappy with me."

"I want to see June Renfrow from Galachand. That's allowed, isn't it?"

"Certainly. I'll note that in my breviary."

"Now is when I'd like to see her. You can send for her."

"No," said the android. "However, come Sunday she'll visit you. That's allowed on visiting day."

By Sunday it would be too late. By the time June got back to the capital and went through the channels Monday would be over. Well, maybe, like in the old prison joke, she'd bring him a cake with a file in it.

The android patted him on the back and Frank tumbled over onto the sofa.

* * *

"Now about your last meal,"

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said the android dutifully.

"I'd like to see a menu."

"If you had been a bit more open about your food beliefs I'd know how to handle this," said the andy. "I'm anxious to have everything go along smoothly."

"This is Sunday, isn't it?"

"10 AM on a beautiful Sunday morning."

"Where's June Renfrow."

"This afternoon."

"Will I be able to talk to her alone?"

The android's head rattled no. "I must be present to see that everything goes well. It's for the girl's sake as well as yours. You wouldn't want a nice girl left alone in a small room with a dangerous killer? Of course not."

"I have a last request."

"That's the spirit."

"I want to cook my own last meal."

The android was silent. Then it said, "There seems to be no objection. You'll be provided with a harmless cooking mechanism and the necessary ingredients first thing tomorrow."

"Today. I'd like my last meal today."

"And take your long journey on an empty stomach?"

Frank folded his hands. "I'm a sentimentalist. I'd sort of be pleased if I could have my last meal in the company of my good friend from Galachand, June Renfrow."

"A sentimentalist?" asked the android. "I don't have a button for that one."

"About the meal?"

After a pause the Nondenominational Priest Android said, "So long as there is no violence."

"I have to confess some vanity," Frank said.

"Go on. If that's part of your sentimentalist belief, confess away."

"I'm fairly proud of my cooking ability. Especially my cakes."

"Indeed?"

"Would it be possible for me to bake an extra cake to give to Miss Renfrow."

"A memento mori so to speak?"

"A chocolate fudge memento mori. And I'd like a box to put it in."

After a quiet moment the android said, "That will be possible. There's quite a Last Request Department here."

"I know."

"Your implements and materials will be delivered in one hour. Give me a list of what you require."

Frank paced the room. Four years ago he'd taken the compulsory Civil Service cooking classes. He hoped he'd retained some of it. He gave the android a list of cooking and baking equipment and assorted foods

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and ingredients. He included enough stuff for three or four cakes. If he could get June and a cake out of the prison he might still have a chance.

JUNE RENFROW came up through the floor with the Nondenominational Priest Android just as Frank lit the candles on the white clothed dining table.

"Frank!" she said.

"Sit down," he said.

The android pulled a chair back for the girl and then moved to a corner of the room, where it leaned with arms folded.

June smiled tentatively. "You usually take all this so seriously, Frank. I wasn't expecting a joke. Is it your birthday or something?"

Frank called to the android, "Who am I?"

"Ned Elven, the Conservative Butcher," answered the andy.

June took a punch card from her shoulder bag. "That's who I'm supposed to be seeing."

"They think I'm Ned Elven."

"They?"

Frank gestured at the walls. "#74. It's on the fritz. How do things look from the outside?"

"The same," the girl said. "A clean comfortable automatic prison. The kind anybody'd be happy locked up in."

"They think I'm Ned Elven and because of that I am going to be terminated tomorrow."

"Frank!"

"So that's why I'm here," he said, sitting down across from her, his hands resting flat on the table. "See, they think I'm Ned Elven."

"Then you must be," she said, standing.

Frank reached across and caught her arm. "June, wait now."

"No contact," called the android. "A goodbye handshake is permitted at the end of the interview."

"Frank," said June, "we've talked about this so often." She sat again. "I asked you how you could work here. Not help anyone, just tend the place. You said it wasn't a bad job. And, anyway, the automatic prisons never made a mistake. They were like the andy courts and cybernetic judges and all that. All the tedium of trials and paper work are taken over by infallible machines. Well, okay. You are Ned Elven then. It's obviously just as simple as that."

"Rasmussen, in the Propaganda Wing, dropped a three feet in diameter ball of soup cracker wrappings down his dispozer. I don't know. Maybe that threw everything out of kilter for a few moments. And that's how they got me mixed up with Elven."

"Just a small error."

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FRANK clenched his fists. All right, June. For all I know Ned Elven is here at #74 because of some kind of screw up, too. Maybe somebody in the Prison Bureau has a memo to that effect going through channels right now."

"For somebody with such a high score on the Warden aptitude test that's no way to talk."

"Okay," said Frank. "Maybe the grading android made a mistake, too."

"Oh?"

"June, will you help me?"

"Here now," called the android.

"Help me in a philosophical sense."

"All right then," said the android.

June nodded her head. "Yes, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make fun of you or anything. It just seemed funny in a strange sort of way. Yes, I'll help. Is there time to get to the capital and see somebody."

"No," said Frank. "I don't think you could even get a firm appointment set up by tomorrow."

June's face paled. "Frank, I don't know . . ."

"Yes, you do. Remember the time you had dinner with me at the cottage."

She smiled for a second. "Yes."

"And I told you about how the whole place runs."

June bit her lip. Then she tilted her head slightly to the left. "And how it doesn't run?"

"That's right."

She said, "Would a dedicated Warden do something like that?"

"Yes."

"I'll try," she said. "But—words fail me. And I'm not good at memorizing either."

"I know. I made you a cake."

"Beg pardon?"

"I decorated it myself and put it in that box there." He pointed to a square white box sitting on the middle of the sofa.

"It's a handsome cake," said the android. "I popped in while he was decorating it. All poetry and such on top."

June nodded at Frank. "I'll open it when I get outside."

"In that order."

"You're not eating," said the android. "Let's not have your last meal turn into a fiasco."

"If it works," said the girl, "I'll stop at the old orchard for awhile."

Frank took a deep breath. He looked at June. He glanced at the android and began to eat.

THE Nondenominational Priest Android folded up the table cloth and stepped back as the table dropped into the floor. "It went rather well," he said.

"Yes," said Frank. "The meat may have been done." June had left half an hour ago.

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"The young lady seemed to have enjoyed it. Often it pays to think of others."

"That's occurred to me lately."

The android said, "Perhaps you've had some sort of profound and enlightening experience."

"Nothing like that," said Frank. "I've just looked at my aptitudes from a different angle. I don't think I'm really suited for this kind of work at all. No matter what any android says."

"Present company included?"

"No, you're a good guy."

"I certainly."

"Certainly what?"

All the lights went out and Frank became aware of all the whirrings and hummings and tickings of the place now that they had stopped.

"You were saying?"

Frank felt his way to the spot where the android usually came through the floor. There was a panel there and, kneeling, Frank got the tip of a cake froster into the seam. Then his fingertips. The door slid easily back and Frank let himself drop down through the bottom of the Termination Suite.

He was in an android tunnel now, one used by Guards and the rest of the automatic staff.

Frank banged his ankle against a stopped guard and his nose against the edge of a kitchen attendant's tray before he got up into the prison corridor.

This should be the Propaganda Wing. There was noise here, shuffling and talking. Doors were sliding open and men were running.

FRANK fell in with a group of prisoners who seemed to know where they were going. None of them had ever seen him and since #74 was a Middle Security Prison there was no uniform. He should be able to pass for a prisoner even when they got outside in the light.

In what must have been Recreation Pavillion #14 the escaping men from the Propaganda Wing converged with those from the Counterfeiting Wing and the two groups broke through the doors beyond the tennis courts together.

It was some escape. The fields were full of prisoners. Four hundred of them. Four hundred and one including Frank.

He cut across toward his cottage. It was on fire. And a dozen men, from the Armed Assault Wing it looked like, were scattered in front of it.

The old orchard was a half mile beyond his cottage, off an overgrown trail. He and June had walked there once. He hoped she hadn't run into anyone.

He ran, passing through the scattering prisoners. Now he was

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uncertain. Were they all dangerous? Or were all four hundred of them at #74 because of kinks in the mechanism.

Up among the dead trees it was quiet again. Frank ran for the clearing he remembered.

June was not there.

He stood in the center of the dry dusty circle and looked around.

Something touched his shoulder. He glanced up. A small cruiser was hovering about twenty feet above him, its ladder dangling, tapping at his sleeve. He spotted the Galachand emblem on the cruiser's underside. He grinned and went up the ladder. At the top he said. "You got your cruiser away safely."

"Seems like," said June, taking his arm and steadying him as he climbed through the doorway.

Frank settled next to her in the passenger seat, pulled up the ladder, and closed the ship door. "Thanks."

"All I did was read the passwords off the cake. And then pull the switch."

"I suppose I could have tried to recite the passwords out loud and have you memorize them."

"With my memory this was much better," said June. "And now what?"

Frank leaned back in the seat. "Well, how about using your influence with Galachand to smuggle us to a new territory someplace for awhile."

"Us?"

"Okay?"

"Fine."

"I wonder," said Frank, "if I can go up against this whole system here."

"The Prison Bureau?"

"It doesn't seem right anymore."

"You can try."

"I guess I'd like to do that."

June activated the cruiser and it moved up and away from the old orchard.

All across the fields below men were scattering and running. Some of them dived for the ground when the cruiser's shadow touched them.

"A damn efficient escape," said June.

Frank watched the men spread further and further from Automatic Prison #74. "I wonder how all this will look on my job résumé," he said, turning to look at the girl.

THE END

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MARTIN DONISTHORPE *Armstrong is an author who enjoyed considerable vogue both in England and the United States in the twenties and thirties, both for fiction and poetry and in the fantasy world is known primarily for three short story collections which contain some excellent fantasies. While his most popularly collected volumes of the off-trail and fantastic are* The Bazaar and Other Stories (*1924*) *and* The Fiery Dive and Other Stories (*1929*), *his single best short is probably the* Presence of Mind *which appeared in the relatively obscure* General Buntop's Miracle and Other Stories *published in 1934, by Harcourt, Brace & Co.*

To my view, Presence of Mind *is the finest fantasy of coincidence ever written. At least I have never read a better one. Louis Untermyer called Armstrong "a prose writer of delicate nuances," and nowhere is that quality more successfully evidenced than in* Presence of Mind. Presence of Mind *is one of those rare things in modern fiction, a story that can be read aloud.*

It is a magnificent example of what is really good in British humor. It has had at least one prominent imitation but nothing of a similar nature has ever preceded it. Upon finishing it, readers may make a dash to search out more by the author, convinced that here is a writer even more adept at lightly turning the macabre than John Collier, with a high sense of frolic to boot. Alas, one of Armstrong's strong points as a writer was his immense versatility. He could do many varieties of fiction well and he believed in spreading his talents about. There is no sizable body of this brand of humor or fantasy. Those of you who have read his short story The Pipe Smoker *in an early Alfred*

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PRESENCE OF MIND

By MARTIN ARMSTRONG

Introduction by Sam Moskowitz

Illustrator SUMMERS

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Hitchcock paperback will realize that it is antipodal to this yarn, even though it initially appeared in the same volume.

To many readers this tale will evoke nostalgic memories of Unknown Worlds *magazine, because it bears a spiritual relationship to that publication's policies.*

An early enthusiast of Robert Louis Stevenson, Armstrong found his interests grow to embrace most classical and modern literature. He was a serious poet and had many collections of verse published, but never achieved much critical recognition. Some of his better known novels are At the Sign of the Goat and Compasses *(1925)*; Desert, *(1926)*; The Water is Wide *(1927) and* A Case of Conscience *(1936).*

Born near Newcastle-on-Tyne, England in 1882, his maternal grandmother, Elizabeth Wordsworth was a cousin to the poet. In 1930 he married Jessie (McDonald) Aiken, previously wife of the noted author Conrad Aiken.

Termed by critics as an example and exponent of some of the finest qualities in British writing he was called "sane and humorous" and accused of deliberately avoiding tragedy in his plot structure.

Perhaps it is indeed fortunate that he possessed all the above qualities or we might not have had a fantasy quite as delightful as Presence of Mind.

FOR years Mr. Pellett, a flourishing and much respected solicitor, plump, cherry-faced, middle-aged and methodical, had resented King's Square, for King's Square lay, a formidable impediment, in a direct line between his home and his office in Yorrick Street. If only there had been an exit at the top of King's Square it would have landed him in a fraction of a minute in Yorrick Street, bang opposite his office. But King's Square was a *cul-de-sac*. In consequence Mr. Pellett was obliged, in order to reach his office (which, on principle, he always did on foot), to make an irritating detour of at least two hundred yards. If the top of King's Square had been closed by houses, Mr. Pellett would have felt no right to a grievance, for though well aware that by entering the front door of one of those hypothetical houses and issuing by the back door he would have found himself in Yorrick Street, he would none the less have conceded that a man cannot use a private house as a public thoroughfare. But, in point of fact, the impassable barrier consisted not of houses, but

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of an iron railing with a gate in it. Inside this railing was a lawn, a rather mangy lawn, and a few plane-trees, and, beyond these, another railing, the Yorrick Street railing, also with a gate in it. Through the trees one could see Yorrick Street a mere stone's throw away, yet hopelessly cut off. For this enclosure was private: it was, in fact, the garden of a large house in the north-east corner of King's Square whose porch stood mid-way between gate and gate. If one had had occasion to call at that house it would have been simple to enter by the King's Square gate, pay one's call, and leave by the Yorrick gate. But Mr. Pellett knew nothing of the occupant of the house, and so he had no possible excuse for calling. Accordingly he never did call, never, that is, until that unhappy morning—a wiser man would have been warned, for it was a Friday and the thirteenth of the month—in the summer of 1930.

ON that morning Mr. Pellett had an important appointment at his office at nine-thirty, a consultation with a colleague, a Mr. Berkamsted Brown. Nine-thirty was the precise time at which he invariably arrived there, and, for once in his life, he started from home ten minutes late. It was not his fault. A sick parlor-maid, a disobliging housemaid, a delayed breakfast (a long tale of disorganization and suffering) were to blame; but the fact remains that he started late. Another man would no doubt have taken a bus, but that was not Mr. Pellett's way. To abandon his invariable habit, wilfully to add another detail to the disorganization which had already devastated the morning, would have been, to his way of thinking, the most deplorable weakness. No, Mr. Pellett would walk as usual, except that he would, of course, walk faster.

But he did not, as it turned out, walk quite fast enough, for, as he approached the neighbourhood of King's Square, he found that it was already three minutes to the half hour. The state of affairs was critical, it called for instant action, and with an almost military precision he conceived and embarked upon a bold and simple plan. In fact he entered King's Square at the southern end and proceeded to walk up it. He was resolved simply to violate, if we may use the expression, the strip of garden at the top and so reach his office on time. It was probable, after all, that no one would see him do so, and even if he were detected, if someone in the house realized what he was up to and came out to protest, well, by that time he would be through the Yorrick Street gate and out of reach.

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True bravery consists not in being merely reckless and thick-skinned, but in consciously controlling the mind in the face of danger. Having conceived and set in motion his plan, Mr. Pellett thought no more about it; that is to say, he refused to allow it to prey on his mind as he walked up King's Square and so was able to reach the gate in the railings in a state of absolute composure. And even at that point he did not quail, for the reflection that in a quarter of a minute the whole exploit would be over gave a positive relish to it, and he opened the gate with an almost swashbuckling air.

The gravel path between the two gates led, of course, straight past the porch, and just as Mr. Pellett reached the porch an unforeseen incident occurred. A telegraph-boy came rather suddenly out of it. The occurrence was in itself a trifle, but in the circumstances it made Mr. Pellett jump. He jumped, and, so as not to collide with the telegraph-boy, he stopped. What was it that made him also glance into the porch? Some half-heard sound perhaps, or that sixth sense that warns us sometimes of a yet unseen presence. Be that as it may, Mr. Pellett found himself looking into the face of a manservant who was standing in the half-open doorway. Tactics, as the well-informed will not need to be told, is the science of action in the presence of the enemy. There can be no doubt that Mr. Pellett was a born tactician, for now a very rapid and highly complex process took place in his brain, and in a moment he had smiled at the manservant and asked with perfect calm: "Am I right in supposing that Mr. Spoffin lives here?"

SPOFFIN! What a discovery! Mr. Pellett was so delighted with it, and with the agility with which he had met the crisis, that he had to call up all his self-control to keep a straight face. His delight however, was premature, for to his dismay the servant bowed and replied: "Quite right, Sir. Mr. Spoffin."

Mr. Pellett gave a little gasp. But next moment he was himself again. The shock had put him on his mettle. "I mean," he said, "Mr. Muggleton Spoffin."

Again by an almost superhuman presence of mind, by deftly qualifying the teacherous Spoffin by that ingenious Muggleton, he had averted a humiliating accident. Or so he thought. But, alas, no. For the manservant, as if reassured now of Mr. Pellett's *bona fides* stepped back to admit him. "I think Mr. Muggleton Spoffin is expecting you, Sir."

Mr. Pellett put out a hand and steadied himself against one of the pillars of the porch. But he

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was not beaten yet: not he. "Excuse me," he said, "but I should like to be quite certain. "I have had," he waved an explanatory hand, "such . . . er . . . difficulties so many . . . er . . . misdirections. The gentleman I am seeking is Mr. Z. Q. Muggleton Spoffin."

Mr. Pellett threw back his head and stared at the fellow with a bold eye. But the manservant, as if to put an end to the visitor's meticulous pedantry threw the front door wide open. "He's waiting for you, Sir," he said. "Will you please step in."

Mr. Pellett became suddenly angry. The fellow was going too far. "Come, come, my man!" he said. "Think of what you're saying. Not Z. Q?"

The man smiled wearily. "It's really quite all right, Sir. Look for yourself." He pointed to a brass plate on the open door and then stood deferential, welcoming, bored, his whole attitude beckoning Mr. Pellett into the house.

But Mr. Pellett stepped back. "No, no," he said. "No, no, no, I won't come in. I merely wanted to leave a message for Mr. . . . er . . . Mr. . . . er . . . !" In his agony he forgot every one of his brilliant improvisations and he knew, besides, that his ingenuity was bankrupt, that he was going to be unable to formulate a message.

But though his imagination had given out, he yet remained, amid the wreckage of his scheme, a cool tactician. "On second thoughts," he said, "I'll write a note. Yes, a note will be much better." And he had already turned his back on the manservant, salvation was already in sight, when a loud voice arrested him.

"My dear Sir, my dear Sir, pray come in. This is too good, too kind."

Mr. Pellett should have run, of course. He should have simply given the whole thing up and run. But instead he turned. That was his one mistake: he turned, and, automatically as it were, took the proffered hand of a large portly, middle-aged gentleman in morning coat, grey tousers, white spats, with gold pincenez dangling on his waistcoat by a black ribbon, who had come out on to the step. He took the hand, and gazed into a large, clean-shaven, fleshy face; noted, in his despair, a full, loose chin, drooping, watery blue eyes, and a rosebud mouth, and allowed himself to be led into the hall and graciously pushed, by a fat hand on his shouder, up the stairs.

"Too good, my dear Sir! Too kind!" His host kept up a soft murmur of gratitude until they had reached a library on the first floor.

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"Now pray sit down," said Mr. Muggleton Spoffin, drawing up an armchair, "and allow me to put the case before you in as few words as possible."

MR. PELLETT had not intended to sit down, but his host's polite urgency had tipped him backwards, and he fell into a deep, extremely comfortable chair. "But . . . but . . . but," he stammered. "But let me first explain. There has, I think, been some . . . some misunderstanding."

"Undoubtedly," said Mr. Spoffin, "undoubtedly a very grave misunderstanding. You will have gathered that from my letter. You will have gathered, too, that I am determined to take proceedings. No other course is open to me. Proceedings for libel, slander, whatever the legal term may be; and I am relying on you, Mr. Ledbitter. . . ."

With a supreme effort Mr. Pellett struggled out of his chair and stood up. "One moment, Sir," he broke in; "one moment. I must insist on a hearing. I have an important appointment, an extremely important appointment, for which I am already"—he seized his watch and regarded it with agony—"already ten minutes late, and I must insist on terminating this . . . this ridiculous, this preposterous . . ."

Mr. Muggleton Spoffin stepped back. His rosebud mouth pursed itself indignantly. With his right hand he snatched at his swinging pince-nez, and with a sudden deft twitch hooked it on to his nose. Thereupon his expression changed suddenly. His jaw dropped, his absurd mouth fell open. "But . . . but . . . but . . . God bless my soul, it isn't Ledbitter."

"Quite so," replied Mr. Pellett triumphantly, "it isn't Ledbitter."

Mr. Spoffin went as red as a turkey-cock. "Then what the devil are you doing here, Sir? Tell me that. You enter my house on false pretences; you waste my time by . . . by . . ."

This was too much. Mr. Pellett became as angry as Mr. Spoffin. "False pretences!" he exclaimed furiously. "On the contrary, it was you, Sir, who dragged me in on false pretences. I didn't want to come in; I had no intention of coming in; to come in was the last thing I desired. I had merely called at the door to . . . to ask a question, and you must needs . . ."

"And what, pray, was your question?" Mr. Spoffin's voice had assumed a suave and icy dignity.

The question—a master stroke, and Mr. Pellett had it ready—was simply to enquire the way to Yorrick Street; but he was so exasperated—exasperated at his

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missed appointment, at the whole idiotic muddle, and more especially at Mr. Muggleton Spoffin's insufferable tone—that for the moment discretion abandoned him, and he replied, with studied contempt: "I merely called to enquire if you had stopped beating your wife."

It was rude, admittedly; but its effect on Mr. Spoffin was out of all proportion. The blood rushed to his face until it seemed that his features were about to disappear completely, his pince-nez fell off, and he struck his hands together with an explosive violence that totally unmanned Mr. Pellett. "There!" he shouted. "There! That proves everything. I knew it, I knew it all along. The whole thing is a monstrous conspiracy. How dare you, Sir? How dare you come here with no more evidence than . . . than than . . ."

MR. SPOFFIN choked; his eyes grew hard and spherical as the stoppers of lemonade-bottles. When at length he had regained control of himself, he drew a long breath and became suddenly and horribly calm. "I shall send for the police," he said, and made for an electric-bell beside the fireplace.

Mr. Pellett rushed after him. His anger, his courage, his resources were at an end. He was terrified. He seized Mr. Spoffin's arm. "One moment, Sir, I beg. Allow me to explain. I am ashamed, truly ashamed. The whole thing was a ridiculous, an unpardonable joke. A bet! I never ought to have lent myself . . ."

Mr. Spoffin paused. "A bet?"

"Yes, I assure you," Mr. Pellett gabbled glibly, "a bet. Nothing more. I foolishly took a bet that I would call at this house and put that absurd question to the occupant. It was inexcusable. I ought to have known better. But I relied on the good humour of . . . the occupant to . . .

Mr. Spoffin appeared mollified. It appeared that he was convinced, or almost convinced, by Mr. Pellett's explanation.

"I can only apologize," Mr. Pellett concluded, "and beg you to forgive a very foolish jest. I deeply regret that I allowed myself to be drawn into it. I am a Conservative, a member of the Church of England, a solicitor, and, though appearances are against me, a respectable fellow-citizen."

The rehearsal of these unexceptionable facts acted like a tonic on Mr. Pellett. He had completely recovered his dignity and composure: he glowed with conscious rectitude. "Allow me, Sir," he added expansively, taking a green morocco case from his breast-pocket, "allow me to present my card."

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Mr. Muggleton Spoffin accepted the calling-card, and, replacing his pince-nez on his nose, scrutinized it. "Say no more, Mr. Pullett," he replied, laying the card on a table. "You have sufficiently proved your innocence. I should be the last to resent a harmless joke, and, in this case, you were, I am sure, unaware that it was anything more. All I ask is that you will give me the name of the person who offered you the bet."

An expression of pain and weariness crossed Mr. Pellett's face. "Ah now, my dear Mr. Spoffin," he said, "you must spare me that, you must positively spare me that."

But Mr. Spoffin solemnly shook his head. "I have good reasons—reasons in which, if you knew them, you would heartily concur—for insisting. Your friend, unknown to you, has played both you and me a very dastardly trick. He deserves to be punished; he shall be punished, and you must help me to bring it about. Don't be alarmed." Mr. Spoffin, seeing that his visitor was about to interrupt, had raised a silencing hand. "I don't propose to drag you into any legal proceedings. They are my affair. All I ask of you is the name and address of the malicious person. He is not, I should suppose, a close friend."

He raised an eyebrow at Mr. Pellett, who at once repelled the suggestion. "No, no! No, no, no! A mere, the very merest, acquaintance. Hardly that."

"Then you have every reason for helping to bring him to book." He took a diary and pencil from his pocket. "The name, then, is . . . er . . ."

Mr. Pellett hung his head. And intense weariness had fallen upon him. He longed to be left alone, to sleep. For a moment he said nothing. Then, glancing up and seeing Mr. Spoffin still waiting with pencil poised, he said, in the monotonous voice of a schoolboy repeating his catechism, "Algernon Twinkle."

"Ah!" Mr. Spoffin's exclamation made him jump. From the tone of that "Ah!" it seemed that Algernon Twinkle was the very name Mr. Spoffin had been expecting. It was a lucky warning, and Mr. Pellett instantly took advantage of it.

"Forgive me," he said. "I'm quite wrong. It was Twinkle who tried to dissuade us. The culprit is Joshua Palimpsest."

Mr. Spoffin replaced the diary and pencil in his pocket. "I might have guessed it," he said. "No need, Mr. Pullett, to give me his name and address."

BUT even now the unhappy Pellett did not throw up the sponge. Presence of mind might yet save the situation. "Yes, my

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dear Sir," he said, "indeed you must allow me to give you the address. After all, there are, are there not, so many Palimpsests, and a mistake in a case like this . . ."

Mr. Spoffin again took out his diary and pencil. "Perhaps you are right," he said, and waited.

Mr. Pellett took a long breath, and, summoning up the full force of his imagination, he said, without hesitation, "Calceolaria Grove, Hobbleton-on-Sloke."

"Just so; Hants," said Mr. Spoffin, and crossing to a door opposite to that by which they had entered the library he threw it open. "Palimpsest," he called, "please come in here."

There was a brief pause, and then a burly young man, with red hair and a red moustache, totally unknown to Mr. Pellett, came through the open doorway. "Palimpsest," said Mr. Spoffin, "this is Mr. Pullett."

"Pellett," Mr. Pellett corrected, in the faint hope of an alibi.

"Pellett or Pullett, it can make no difference," Mr. Spoffin replied. He turned to the red-haired man. "All further denials, Palimpsest, are useless. Mr. Pullett has told me everything. You took advantage of his ignorance and offered him a bet . . ."

"Bet?" said Palimpsest, indignantly amazed. "I deny it absolutely. I have never seen this gentleman in my life."

Mr. Spoffin shook his head sadly. "You have denied too much already, Palimpsest. This gentleman has told me the whole story. You bet him, as you know well enough, that he would not come here and ask me if I had stopped beating my wife. He gave me your name in full just now, and, in case there should be any doubt about that, added your fantastic address. His story has fully corroborated what I have suspected all along—that you have been spreading malicious reports . . ."

"I have spread no reports, malicious or otherwise," said Palimpsest. "But I repeat what I have told you already, that at the Goodbody's party Twinkle overheard Mrs. Spoffin say that you were in the habit of beating her every evening."

"And I repeat what I have told you already," said Mr. Spoffin, "that my wife assures me, though no assurance was necessary, that she said no such thing."

Palimpsest shrugged his shoulders. Then he turned a sudden and furious gaze on Mr. Pellett. "Do you dare to assert, Sir," he burst out, "That I, Joshua Palimpsest, offered you the bet that Mr. Spoffin has just mentioned. Do you even dare to pretend that you ever spoke a word to me in your life."

Mr. Pellett stared at him

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aghast, crimson with guilt and confusion. He turned to Mr. Spoffin. "I don't know this gentleman," he said. "I never in my life set eyes on him."

"Indeed" said Mr. Spoffin, his manner changing at once to one of cold incredulity. "Then why, if I may ask, did you just now tell me the precise contrary?"

"I . . . er . . . I . . . er . . . there must be some mistake," Mr. Pellett stammered. "After all, there are so many Palimpsests."

"Oh, undoubtedly," sneered Mr. Spoffin icily; "so many Joshua Palimpsests, and so many, so bewildering many, Calceolaria Groves in all the innumerable Hobbleton-on-Slokes."

"Quite! Quite!" murmured poor Pellett, with a deplorable attempt at a smile.

BUT next moment the red-haired Palimpsest laid a heavy hand on his shoulder. "Look here, my friend," he said, "you may as well give the game up at once. I've caught you, and I'm going to keep you." He turned to Mr. Spoffin. "Well, Spoffin, we've got to the root of the matter at last. What is the next move. Hadn't we better ring up the police?"

Mr. Pellett, his forehead cold with sweat, tried to make a last appeal. "Gentlemen," he said, "will you listen to me while I tell you what is actually the solemn truth. I never until a few moments ago heard either of your names. I did not even know such names existed. In point of fact, I invented them in an attempt to escape from an undignified situation, for your man, Mr. Spoffin, caught me in the act of using your garden as a public thoroughfare."

"Invented? You invented our names?" said Mr. Spoffin. "I fail to understand you."

"When I asked your man if Mr. Muggleton Spoffin lived here," continued Mr. Pellett, passing a handkerchief across his brow, "I was under the impression that I had invented the name. I believed that I had also invented Palimpsest."

"You seem," remarked Mr. Muggleton Spoffin with a contemptuous smile, "to regard yourself as a person of some ingenuity."

Mr. Pellett made a deprecating gesture. "I can only suppose," he said, "that my mind, my . . . what do you call it? . . . my unconscious mind, has somehow got in touch with the private concerns of you two gentlemen. I swear, gentlemen . . ." He glanced at the library shelves, then at Mr. Spoffin. "Perhaps, Sir, you will oblige me with a Bible? I swear that what I have said is the solemn truth. Is it too much to hope that you will believe me?"

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Mr. Spoffin laughed coldly. "It is, Mr. Pullett," he said; "very much too much."

Palimpsest touched his friend's arm. "A doctor, perhaps," he whispered, "rather than the police."

At that moment the door opened, and the manservant appeared. "Mr. Ledbitter to see you, Sir."

"Ah," said Mr. Spoffin, "most opportune! Show him up, Barker." He turned to Palimpsest. "Ledbitter will advise us how to proceed. Meanwhile, perhaps you had better take Mr. Pullett into the study while I have a word with Ledbitter here."

PALIMPSEST nodded, and the crestfallen Pellett found himself shepherded none too politely towards the door by which Palimpsest had entered a moment ago. On his way, he caught sight of his card, the card that, in a flood of self-righteousness, he had presented to Mr. Spoffin, lying on the corner of the table he was passing. Swiftly and surreptitiously he grabbed it and thrust it into his pocket. Thank God! That clue at least to his identity had been suppressed. Next moment he found himself in a small room of which Palimpsest was shutting the door. Having done so, Palimpsest once more inspected his captive. Something, it seemed, was puzzling him. "Pellett?" he said at last. "Your name is Pellett?"

Mr. Pellett made a little bow. "It is, Sir. Roger Pellett. You know the name?" He had the impression that Mr. Palimpsest was becoming more favourably disposed towards him. Had he, after all, been convinced by the true, the improbable explanation?

"And how am I to know, Mr. Pellett, that this is not another of your astonishing inventions?"

A flood of proofs bubbled up in Mr. Pellett's brain. "If you will ring up my office," he began.

But at that moment Mr. Muggleton Spoffin's voice called Palimpsest from the next room, and Palimpsest, abandoning Mr. Pellett, went to the door, opened it, and put his head into the library. A muffled conversation ensued, of which Mr. Pellett caught only the words "peculiar," "incomplete," and "further investigation." Gradually Mr. Palimpsest opened the door wider: he now stood on the threshold, his hand, behind his back, still holding the door-handle. There was a brief silence, a muttered phrase from the library, and then, as if to guard against Mr. Pellett's overhearing, Palimpsest pulled the door shut, shut himself out of the study into the library. Mr. Pellett, staring at the closed door, saw the handle revolve: evidently Palimpsest was still holding it. A sudden desperate resourceful-

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ness seized him. With a wild, circular, crafty glance he surveyed the room, noted a window, another window, a fireplace, and then, on the left of the fireplace, a door. In a second he had darted noiselessly across the thick-piled carpet, in another he had noiselessly turned the handle of the door and opened it. It gave on to the landing.

It seemed to Mr. Pellett, when he looked back afterwards on that delirious half minute, that his feet had never touched the stairs, that the urgency of his impulse to escape had carried him in one grand, hawk-like swoop from landing to hall. Barker was standing near the front door, and, seeing Mr. Pellett hurrying towards him, prepared to open it; but at that moment Mr. Spoffin's voice, loud, authoritative, terrifying, boomed from the landing. "Stop him, Barker! Stop him!'

Mr. Pellett glanced wild-eyed over his shoulder, and saw that Palimpsest was running down the stairs after him. His legs turned to sponge beneath him, but at that desperate moment an inspiration, nothing less, visited him. "Stop him!" he shouted to Barker, taking up Mr. Spoffin's cry. "Stop Mr. Palimpsest!"

He had almost reached the front door now, and, just before he did so, Barker darted past him. He heard a struggle in the hall behind him, and Palimpsest's voice: "Not me, you fool! Not me!" Then there were trees overhead, flying gravel underfoot, the clang of an iron gate, and Yorrick Street, the familiar Yorrick Street, with the porch of his office awaiting him at the other side of the roadway.

By the time he had climbed the steps and hung up his hat, Mr. Pellett, though still somewhat breathless, felt something like his old self again. Robbins, his head clerk, came forward. "Mr. Berkamsted Brown left ten minutes ago, Sir."

"No wonder," said Mr. Pellett. "I'm half an hour late. Most annoying. An accident . . . what might have been a very serious accident. . . . However, that's neither here nor there."

"He said he would call again at twelve o'clock, Sir."

GOOD!" said Mr. Pellett, as, with his usual briskness, he opened the door of his private office and closed it after him. But, once alone, his briskness left him. He went to his desk, sat down, and, instead of plunging into the papers that awaited him there, took his head in his hands. He was tired and bewildered. Already the absurd adventure which had befallen him was beginning, under the influence of the familiar, friendly surroundings of his office, to seem unreal.

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"Muggleton Spoffin, Palimpsest, Calceolaria Grove!" The fantastic names came back to him. he stared at them and rejected them. No, they wouldn't do. They were not real. They were obviously fictions, and rather bad ones at that. Barker, on the other hand, was an ordinary, straightforward name, and there, across the street, thinly veiled by the boughs of plane-trees, was the house he had just so precipitately left. But had he really left it, had he really ever been into it? Hadn't the whole ridiculous business happened merely in his mind? For years he had been particularly aware of that house and garden, had resented their presence there at the top of the square, barring the way to his office; and this morning, when their obstruction had been particularly annoying, he had had them more than usually in mind, and so had ended by inventing this absurd fantasy about them as he hurried abstractedly to his office. Yes, that was it. That was it.

By repeating this explanation to himself, Mr. Pellett tried to convince himself that it was true. If only he could succeed in believing it absolutely, then, he felt, it would actually *become* true, and—blessed, alleviating thought!—Mr. Muggleton Spoffin and Mr. Joshua Palimpsest would sink back into the non-existence from which he had so alarmingly called them. But the conditions of believing it were hard. To be able to do so he would have to admit that between the moments of leaving home and arriving at his office he had fallen into a state bordering on insanity. That would be alarming, very alarming; and yet wouldn't it be a cheap price to pay for the extinction of Mr. Spoffin and Mr. Palimpsest? But there was another difficulty. What about this lost half hour? Even if Spoffin and Palimpsest and the visit to the house were explained away, the fact remained that he had arrived half an hour late at the office. That was no mere fancy. The office clock, Robbins the head clerk, Mr. Berkamsted Brown—gone ten minutes ago, tired of waiting—bore witness to the objective reality of that half hour. That, at least, he could not claim to have invented. It would have to be faced and dealt with: he would have to explain to himself how he had disposed of it. Not, obviously, in walking straight from his home to his office! He must have executed some unconscious detour. While his mind was busy inventing Mr. Muggleton Spoffin—his staircase, library, study, with its providential second door—and Mr. Palimpsest, his body must have been trudging the streets in the neighbourhood of King's Square and Yorrick

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Street. That would have to be conceded. If only he could recall some detail, the smallest, most trivial detail, of that forgotten walk, how reassuring it would be.

AND, just as a few minutes ago he had made a determined attempt to abolish Mr. Spoffin and the rest, so now Mr. Pellett set himself to construct a plausible route for his half-hour's wandering, and, a much more difficult matter, to believe in it: and —such is the suggestibility of the human mind—before very long he had almost managed to remember himself standing before the windows of the Utility Furnishing Company in Plug Street, a street about half a mile north of Yorrick Street, inspecting a large petrol-driven lawnmower, painted green and scarlet. As a drowning man clings to a lifebuoy, so Mr. Pellett clung to that lawnmower, and, as he clung, its reality grew: a name in gold letters—The Presto—bloomed upon the green of the grass-box: nuts and screws budded from the scarlet of its working parts. In order to encourage it to the utmost, Mr. Pellett entered the shop and enquired about it, walked round it and touched it, and, finally, purchased it. Another five minutes of concentrated thought and the thing had become as real as anything could be that was not actually present. "Yes," he muttered to himself, "The Presto! A very up-to-date machine!" And now, just to try the effect of this new invention, he allowed his mind to switch back for one brief, surreptitious glance at Mr. Spoffin and Mr. Palimpsest. They had weakened perceptibly: virtue had gone out of them.

Mr. Pellett sighed, half with relief, half with exhaustion. The whole thing was very harassing, and it was terribly hard work, much harder than the professional work to which he now tried to turn his attention. And it was all the fault of those confounded servants. If the parlourmaid hadn't been ill and the housemaid so disobliging, none of these tiresome problems would have arisen. Reaching out a hand he took up a bunch of title deeds, and for over an hour found shelter in the intricacies of the law.

He was aroused by a tap at the door. It was Robbins, the head clerk, ushering in Mr. Berkamsted Brown. Mr. Pellett rose with outstretched hand. "A thousand apologies, my dear Sir, for failing you this morning. Circumstances over which I had no control; in short, what might have been a very serious accident . . . But I won't waste more of your time by explaining. Pray sit down and tell me at once what I can do for you."

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He himself sat down, placed his elbows upon his desk, and, pressing the finger-tips of his right hand against those of his left, assumed the air of benevolent attention which was a part of his office equipment.

"I want to consult you," said Mr. Berkamsted Brown, "about a very peculiar action which is being brought against a client of mine, so peculiar that I felt that a second opinion was advisable. The whole thing is really rather ridiculous. My client, a man named Palimpsest . . ."

"Palimpsest? Impossible!" shouted Mr. Pellett, sitting up suddenly like a jack-in-the-box.

Mr. Brown was surprised, almost startled, at his colleague's violence. "You know him?" he asked.

"Oh, no!" said Mr. Pellett quickly. "No, no, no, not at all. But the name . . ."

"Is a curious one," said Mr. Brown. "True. But rather a fine, rather a dignified one, don't you think? I wish I could say the same of the other party. The name of the other party, if you will believe me, is . . ."

Mr. Pellett held up his hand. "One moment, Mr. Brown!"

MR. Brown paused with raised eyebrows. It seemed to him that Mr. Pellett was choking. His face had become very red: his teeth and fists were clenched. But Mr. Pellett was not choking: he was simply making a gigantic effort of will. He had, as it were, his shoulder to a door which was being powerfully pushed from the other side, and he was resolved, desperately resolved, that the door should not open, that the determined intruder, whose presence he felt but could not see, must be excluded. If he had allowed Mr. Berkamsted Brown to complete his sentence, all would have been lost. But he had secured a brief respite in which, if only he could exercise sufficient will-power, the enemy might be repulsed. He gave a second and even more powerful heave; his face grew purpler, his clenched fists quivered, the knuckles of both hands were white with the tensity of his grip. Then, relaxing himself and letting out a long breath, he nodded to Mr. Brown. "The name, you were saying, of the other party . . . ?"

"Is Spoffin, if you please," said Mr. Brown; "and, as if that were not enough, Muggleton Spoffin."

Mr. Pellett bowed his head, and it seemed to Mr. Brown that his colleague had suddenly become small, exhausted, old. "I'm afraid, my dear Sir," he said, "that you're not well."

Mr. Pellett raised lustreless eyes to his. "Have you ever heard," he asked wistfully, "of The Presto lawnmower?"

Mr. Brown shook his head.

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"Never!" he said. "But why should I? I know nothing of lawn-mowers."

Mr. Pellett sighed. "In any case," he said sadly, "it doesn't exist, obviously."

An uncomfortable sensation invaded Mr. Berkamsted Brown: he felt that he was in the presence of mental derangement. He rose from his chair. "On second thoughts, I won't trouble you about this case at present."

But Mr. Pellett sat up and laid his hands on the desk. With a supreme effort he pulled himself together: he was resolved to face everything. "Forgive me," he said. "I was thinking of a case I was looking into when you arrived just now, a case of infringement of patent. It appears that The Presto, a petrol-driven lawn-mower . . . However, that has nothing to do with the case you came to consult me about." He brushed a hand across his forehead. "The truth is," he said, "I'm a little out of sorts. A bad night and . . . and a worse breakfast. I find it a little difficult to concentrate. Please go on. This Mr. Muggleton Spoffin, you tell me, is bringing an action against your client Palimpsest—an action for defamation of character, wasn't it? Where had we got to? Mr. Palimpsest is accused, isn't he, of spreading the report that Mr. Spoffin beats his wife?"

It was Mr. Brown's turn to sit up. Mr. Pellett, so far from being insane, had suddenly become only too sane. "But my dear Sir," he broke out, "I hadn't got as far as that. I had said nothing about . . ."

"Oh, but you had," said Mr. Pellett energetically. "Indeed you had. Else how should I know it?"

The question was unanswerable. And yet Mr. Brown could have sworn that he had not mentioned a word about the wife-beating. He passed a hand over his brow. It was he, then, and not Pellett, whose mind was a little out of gear this morning. Well, no wonder. Hadn't Ethel complained only yesterday that he had been working too hard ever since Christmas? He took a note-book from his breast-pocket. "I beg your pardon. Evidently you must be right. Well"—he opened the note-book—"let us run through the evidence, point by point."

AS Mr. Berkamsted Brown proceeded, Mr. Pellett regained his customary alertness. In his interest in a curious and somewhat intricate case, he forgot that it was concerned with the two sinister and unnatural persons who had so seriously upset his morning, and, when Mr. Brown's exposition was finished, he gave his opinion emphatically.

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"I can't see that Spoffin has a case."

"Precisely my conclusion," said Mr. Brown. "Then you agree that there's no question of climbing down?"

"Certainly not," said Mr. Pellett with decision. "If Timberley agrees, as I feel sure he will . . ." Mr. Pellett was in his element. He talked volubly and learnedly for twenty minutes, and, long after Mr. Berkamsted Brown had left him, he ruminated the case with pursed lips and occasional vigorous nods of the head. He returned to it again with gusto on his way home, after an afternoon devoted to other legal matters, and it was not until he reached home that he was forced, suddenly and unexpectedly, to envisage his troubles once more.

Mrs. Pellett met him in the front hall. "My dear Roger," she said, "what is the meaning of this?"

"The meaning of what?"

She led him to the drawing-room, and pointed through the French window into the garden. "Of this?" she said.

Mr. Pellett glanced down the lawn. There, right in the foreground, gorgeous in its new green and scarlet, unmistakably solid and real, stood a huge motor lawnmower. From where he stood he could see its name on the grass-box: The Presto.

Mr. Pellett turned away his eyes. Perhaps The Presto, though painfully visible there on the lawn, was not yet absolutely real: by disregarding it he might be able to prevent it from achieving actuality. It might, even, fade in the course of the night. "The fact is," he said to his wife with apparent inconsequence, "I require a holiday. I'm not quite the thing. What do you say to a short sea-voyage. We might take a P. & O. or an Orient boat to Gibraltar and catch the next one back—a matter of ten days or a fortnight at most. It would freshen one up."

After some argument, Mrs. Pellett agreed. The decision was an unspeakable relief to Mr. Pellett: as he lay in bed that night, he felt that an immense weight had been lifted from his mind. But what, he asked himself, did he expect from this brief holiday? He could not say. It was all a matter of feelings rather than thoughts, of instinct rather than reason. He felt—vaguely but profoundly felt—that if he left England for a while he would be giving things a chance to settle down. But what did he mean by that? What he really meant, though his reason would not have admitted it, was that he hoped that, by the time he came back, Mr. Spoffin, Mr. Palimpsest, and The Presto would have ceased to exist—still more, that

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they would prove never to have existed.

Unusual occurrences call forth new adjustments of the mind. During the last fourteen hours Mr. Pellett's mind had been compelled to assume an entirely new attitude, to think thoughts and hold beliefs which yesterday would have seemed mere madness to him. It seemed probable, it seemed almost certain, that he had invented Mr. Spoffin and Mr. Palimpsest; and, if that was so, all sorts of other impossibilities became possible and had to be reckoned with. For instance, he had hoped, irrationally perhaps (but to-day everything had become irrational), that by inventing The Presto lawn-mower he would eliminate the previous, more disquieting, invention. But there he had been wrong. His mind was not yet properly attuned to the metaphysical world, or the supernatural world, or whatever this alarming world was into which he had inadvertently blundered. Yes, he had been wrong. All he had done had been to invent for himself another alarming bugbear. He would try no more inventing for the present. As he could not eliminate Mr. Spoffin, Mr. Palimpsest, or The Presto, he would try eliminating himself for ten days or so. He hoped and believed that when he returned England would have regained her sanity.

IT was a pleasant afternoon when Mr. and Mrs. Pellett steamed down the Thames from Tilbury in a fourteen-thousand-ton liner. Already, as he paced the deck by his wife's side and watched the quaint, smoke-grimed jumble of little wharves, little houses and warehouses, and occasionally a little church-tower gliding past them, dropping slowly back towards the London they had left behind them, he felt that Spoffin, Palimpsest, and The Presto had dwindled to the condition of an unpleasant and somewhat too vivid dream. But, whatever they were, he was leaving them, and they, deprived of their originator like flowers cut from their parent plant, would hardly last more than a day or two. He had been so resolved not to believe in The Presto that he had given no orders about it, had simply left it, if really there was anything to leave, on the lawn in front of the drawing-room window.

About six o'clock Mrs. Pellett retired to their cabin to unpack, and Mr. Pellett sought the smoking-room. A whiskey-and-soda and a cigar before dressing for dinner seemed to him a good idea. The smoking-room appeared to be empty, but, after Mr. Pellet had toddled to a bell and pressed it, he noticed, above the back of an easy chair that stood turned away from him at the other end

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of the room, one other human object—a pink bald head, like the top of an Easter egg, with a fringe of grey beneath the pink. Mr. Pellett sank into a comfortable chair and took up an illustrated paper, and before long a steward had taken his order and brought his whiskey-and-soda. For twenty minutes or so Mr. Pellett read, smoked, and sipped. Then, after consulting his watch, he glanced towards the door. But the door was invisible. It was obscured by a tall, portly figure, the figure of a middle-aged gentleman in morning-coat, grey trousers, white spats, with a large, clean-shaven, fleshy face. The gentleman, having paused, it seemed, between the chair he had left and the smoking-room door, was staring at Mr. Pellett. But Mr. Pellett ignored him, stared past him steadfastly at a panel in oils depicting a group of natives in a Cingalese tea-plantation, and, as he did so, he blew an immense cloud of cigar-smoke from his mouth, endeavouring, like the cuttle-fish, to obliterate his observer, for his observer was unmistakably Mr. Muggleton Spoffin. But in vain. Mr. Spoffin, with a frown, half puzzled, half aggressive, on his pink forehead, advanced through the smoke-screen to within a yard of Mr. Pellett's chair.

"Mr. Cockerel, I believe?" he said in a threatening tone.

Mr. Pellett's skilfully concealed horror changed instantly to indignation. He was angry not only at Mr. Spoffin's stubborn hold on reality, but also at his impertinent trifling with his name. Pullett! Cockerel! The fellow was insufferable. And this anger, as it proved, was Mr. Pellett's salvation: it enabled him to face this new crisis boldly. He kept his head and shook it. "No, Sir!" he said. "No, my name is not Cockerel. Far from it. Yes, indeed, far from it."

BUT Mr. Spoffin grew only the more aggressive. "Come, Sir," he said, "it is useless to pretend you don't know me. You forced your way into my house only four days ago, and then, when you had been confined in the study you deliberately . . ."

But, while he was speaking, Mr. Pellett had taken from his pocket a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles, which he sometimes, though not always, used for reading, and now (a masterly move) he suddenly put them on and stared angrily at Mr. Spoffin through them. "My dear Sir," he said, "I am at a loss to understand what you are talking about. I've never set eyes on you in my life."

Mr. Spoffin quailed. The spectacles, as spectacles do, had considerably altered Mr. Pellett's appearance, and this, combined

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with his rejection of the name Cockerel and his categorical denial of acquaintanceship, had shaken Mr. Spoffin's confidence. Could he possibly be mistaken? But of course not. "Perhaps, Sir," he said, with grim insinuation, "perhaps, though you disclaim the name of Cockerel, you recall that of Spoffin—Muggleton Spoffin."

Mr. Pellett was equal to it. He laughed loudly and smacked his leg. "Ah, I see!" he said. "It's all a joke; though, I must confess, a joke I don't yet quite understand." He laughed again. "Spoffin!" he said with relish. "A capital invention! At least, Sir, you have a nice sense of the ridiculous."

Once again Mr. Pellett gaily echoed the name, and once again exploded with laughter. Then, feigning to become aware of Mr. Spoffin's seriousness, he paused. "Am I wrong?" he asked aghast. "Am I to understand that the name Spoffin actually exists?"

Mr. Spoffin bowed stiffly. "Spoffin, Sir—Muggleton Spoffin—is my name; an old and honourable name."

Mr. Pellett became profusely apologetic. "I'm exceedingly sorry," he said. "I thought—upon my word I did—that you were joking. But why should you assume that I know the name?"

Mr. Spoffin's confidence was gone. He passed a hand across his brow, and sank into the chair next Mr. Pellett's. "Pardon my mistake," he said wearily. "The fact is I'm not quite myself at present. I've had a good deal of worry during the last month or two, and, added to this, for the last four nights I've been troubled with dreams, horrible dreams. I keep dreaming of an automatic lawn-mower. It sounds ridiculous. I know; but when the thing persists over and over again it ceases to be a laughing matter. It becomes harassing, Mr. Cockerel: it becomes terrible."

MR. SPOFFIN'S gaze was tragic. With a determined effort Mr. Pellett suppressed his amazement at this information. He longed to ask Mr. Spoffin the name of the lawn-mower, but he had felt at once that it would be safer to make no comment until he had thought out the implications of this surprising confession.

"I know, of course," Mr. Spoffin went on, "that it's simply a matter of worry and overwork. No doubt these few days at sea will put me right, but, meanwhile, I'm not quite myself, and that must be why, when I caught sight of you just now, I mistook you . . . indeed, I felt sure . . . But I see now I was wrong, quite wrong. The wisest of us make mistakes occasionally, don't we?"

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His smile was deprecating, almost pitiable, and Mr. Pellett was magnanimous.

"Oh, naturally, naturally! But, I must say, you puzzled me, Mr. . . . er . . . ?"

"Spoffin, Muggleton Spoffin," said the poor, crestfallen creature, and, sunk in his chair, he looked already woefully deflated.

"Spoffin! Thank you!" replied the relentless Pellett, feigning to repress an involuntary smile. "I fancied, you know, Mr. Spoffin, that you were practising a hoax on me."

They fell into conversation about the weather, the political situation, and kindred topics, and when Mr. Pellett rose from his chair, declaring that he must go and dress for dinner, Mr. Spoffin accompanied him.

OUTSIDE the door they were met by a middle-aged lady. "I've been looking for you everywhere, Zac," she said. "You'll be late for dinner. You know you always take three-quarters of an hour to dress."

"My dear," said Mr. Spoffin, "this is Mr. Cockerel. Mr. Cockerel, my wife. But I must leave you, or I shall be late." He hurried down the stairs, leaving Mr. Pellett shaking hands with Mrs. Spoffin.

Mr. Pellett regarded the lady with some interest. She was a healthy, well-nourished, contented-looking woman of about fifty. "I ought to explain," he said to her, smiling benignly, "that my name is not Cockerel, though Mr. Spoffin insists on calling me so." Here he stopped, wisely refraining from mentioning what his name actually was.

A shade of anxiety crossed Mrs. Spoffin's brow. "You mustn't mind my husband's eccentricities," she said. "He is suffering from delusions. The doctor thinks it is not very serious. All he wants is rest and change of scene. Tomorrow he may call you Mr. Pullett, and the next day Mr. Palimpsest. If he does, please take no notice."

"Quite so! Quite so!" said Mr. Pellett soothingly. "I suspected" —he tapped his forehead with his forefinger—"that there was some little trouble here. You can trust me to be tactful, Mrs. Spoffin."

"And don't, if you will be so kind, get into conversation with him after dinner. I want him to play cribbage. Conversation excites him, but cribbage soothes him. Every night after dinner, for as long as I can remember, we've played cribbage. Yes, he beats me every night, and that soothes him."

Mr. Pellett gaped at her. "He beats you?"

She nodded. "Yes, every night. He's a very good cribbage player."

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A FLOOD of enlightenment swept across Mr. Pellett's mind, but he succeeded in disguising his amazement, and, with a smile and a bow, he left her. Spoffin, he felt as he trotted downstairs, was well under control.

But though Mr. Pellett had risen to the occasion, the re-emergence of Spoffin had shaken him severely; and, as he lay in bed that night, the full horror of it was born in upon him, and he asked himself, with a thrill of abject fear, whether Palimpsest too was on the boat. That would be appalling. He couldn't, really couldn't, cope with another crisis just yet. He recalled Palimpsest —red-haired, confident, burly. Palimpsest would be much more difficult to confound than poor, pompous Spoffin. He must be careful, very careful. He must wear his horn-rimmed spectacles for the rest of the voyage. His thoughts turned to the lawn-mower. It seemed probable—probable in this mad world into which he had blundered, where probabilities and possibilities were things altogether apart from the consciousness of normal life—that The Presto, that ingenious invention of his, was after all having its effect on Mr. Spoffin, and he realised that he had been unwise in slighting it. He must run it for all it was worth: he must talk about it, think about it, do all in his power to fortify its reality.

As good luck would have it, the weather came to Mr. Pellett's aid. Next day the sea was rough, and the Spoffins did not appear. Nor did Palimpsest. In fact Mr. Pellett and his wife, who were good sailors, had the decks and saloons almost to themselves. "This will set you on your feet again, Roger," said Mrs. Pellett, and Mr. Pellett, reeling violently at a sudden lurch of the ship, declared that it was already doing so. That evening he prayed for a continuation of the bad weather, and the bad weather continued. It continued until they reached Gibraltar. There only, as the Pelletts were about to disembark, did Mr. Spoffin put in a brief appearance beside the gangway. "Good-bye, good-bye, Mr. Pullett," he said, holding out his hand. "I'm sorry to see you're leaving us."

Mr. Pellett grasped the proffered hand. "You're going east?" he asked hopefully.

"No," said Mr. Spoffin, "merely to Marseilles, and back, almost immediately, by land. Let me give you my card." He produced one from a pocket-case. "I hope you'll look us up at home."

Mr. Pellett took the card, slipped it into his waistcoat pocket, and dived down the gangway.

He did not think of Mr. Spoffin

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again until Mrs. Pellett referred to him as they sat at luncheon in their hotel in Gibraltar. "By the way," she said, "who was the strange-looking man who spoke to you as we were leaving the boat?"

Mr. Pellett had refrained from mentioning Mr. Spoffin to his wife, and, now that he threatened to emerge, he sternly pushed him away. "Oh, rather a tiresome person who got into conversation with me in the smoking-room."

"What was his name?"

"His name? I've forgotten. What does it matter?"

"Oh, it doesn't *matter*," said Mrs. Pellett, "but he was such a very peculiar looking person that he roused my curiosity. He gave you his card, you remember. Let me see it."

MR. PELLETT reluctantly slid two fingers into his waistcoat pocket and fished out the card. Before handing it to her he glanced at it himself. "Mr. Z. Q. Muggleton Spoffin," he saw, "13 King's Square." He handed it unwillingly across the table.

Mrs. Pellett took it, inspected it, knit her brows, and handed it back. "But, my dear Roger, this is one of your own cards. The other must still be in your pocket."

Once more Mr. Pellett perused it. It was uncanny, alarming, but an undeniable fact: the card now bore his own name and address. He knew it was the same card—how could it be other?—that he had glanced at a moment ago, but it was out of the question that he should tell her so. He therefore made a pretence of searching again. "No," he said, "no, it's not there. I must have dropped it as I came down the gangway."

And there, ostensibly, the matter ended. But, as Mr. Pellett fell upon an excellent tomato omelette, his mind was busy. The occurrence, alarming though it was, was reassuring. What it came to was this. Here were two equally credible but mutually exclusive facts. The card was Mr. Spoffin's, and the card was his own. It rested with him to choose, to accept one fact and reject the other. Naturally he chose the second. In consequence, Mr. Spoffin's reality was diminished: he was no longer real enough to have a calling-card. It was a great relief. To the surprise of his wife, Mr. Pellett suddenly broke into a voluble dissertation upon lawn-mowers in general and The Presto in particular.

* * *

IT was a little tiresome to have to survey Gibraltar through spectacles intended for reading only, and Mrs. Pellett was puzzled and alarmed by her husband's eccentricity, and tried repeatedly to persuade him to

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abandon them. But Mr. Pellett stubbornly insisted that without them the brilliant southern atmosphere tried his eyes, and soon she gave up worrying him, secretly concluding that his insistence was a lingering symptom of the disorder that had necessitated their holiday. In all other respects he was sane and cheerful. Hearing that they had at least five days to wait for their boat to England, they made an expedition of two days to Ronda, and the time passed pleasantly until they reembarked.

The moment they went on board, Mr. Pellett made a careful study of the list of passengers, and then, assured that it lacked the names of Spoffin and Palimpsest, left off his spectacles. Their liner called at Southampton, and they decided to abandon it there and travel home by train. The distraction of their trip to Ronda, and the calm, enjoyable voyage home, with its inspiring glimpses of Cape Trafalgar and the romantic coast of Portugal, endeared to every English heart by its intimate association with port wine, had reduced Mr. Muggleton Spoffin to little more than a half-forgotten fancy during the difficult hour before dinner, a passing anxiety at the moment of disembarkation at a foreign port. As for Palimpsest, he had shrunk to less than a shadow dimly haunting the limbo of forgotten things. It was pleasant and refreshing to watch the prim green English landscape flow past the carriage windows, and at luncheon-time Mr. and Mrs. Pellett reeled along the corridor towards the restaurant car with an excellent appetite. They were shown to a table for four, still unoccupied, and each took a window seat, facing one another across the table-cloth. They had finished the soup and the fish, and were eyeing appreciatively two plates of roast mutton which the waiter had set before them, when a movement on Mr. Pellett's left startled him, for he had not noticed that anyone else had come to their table. A hand fringed with red hair was politely pushing a salt-cellar towards him. At the same time a voice, a voice curiously, unpleasantly familiar, sounded in his ear. "Salt, Mr. Presto?"

Mr. Pellett did not turn his head: it was needless to do so. He merely gasped, swallowed, unchewed, a mouthful of roast mutton, and, with sudden, desperate assurance, replied, "Thank you, Sir. Though my name is not Presto."

"Hm!" said the voice sardonically. "Then mine's not Palimpsest."

"I should think not indeed," Mr. Pellett replied, as though the mere suggestion was disgusting. "Why should it be? Nothing,

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I should have said, was less likely. Palimpsest, forsooth! What next?"

His reply evidently irritated his neighbour, for he answered with asperity, "And what fault, if I may ask, do you find with the name Palimpsest?"

"The same," said Mr. Pellett promptly, "that I find with that of Presto—that it is ridiculous."

"How dare you, Sir?" Palimpsest raised his voice angrily. "How dare you call my name ridiculous?"

MR. PELLETT turned to his neighbour for the first time, and Mrs. Pellett noted with astonishment that he had surreptitiously assumed his horn-rimmed spectacles. "I have no idea what your name is, Sir," he said angrily. "All I know is that you presumed to invent a ridiculous name for me, and then, for reasons of your own, invented an equally ridiculous one for yourself."

Palimpsest met Mr. Pellett's spectacled gaze, quailed for a moment, then recovered both his confidence and his anger. "Damn it all, Sir," he began hotly.

But Mrs. Pellett interrupted him. "You seem to have forgotten," she said, "that you are in the presence of a lady. My husband's name is not Presto. Our name is on our passport, and if you give us any more trouble I shall send for the guard and have you removed."

Mr. Palimpsest's face fell, and Mr. Pellett followed up his wife's attack by remarking indignantly, "Presto, indeed! A lawn-mower!"

The effect was prodigious. Palimpsest shrank away from him in terror. "A lawn-mower?" he whispered, raising one hand to his brow, as if assailed by a terrible memory.

Mrs. Pellett's cold voice recalled him to himself. "The best thing you can do," she said, pointing across the car, "is to apologize and move to the table opposite."

Palimpsest eyed her, cowed but still doubtful. Then, choosing the discreeter course, he retired to the other table.

When they had finished, Mrs. Pellett, at her husband's suggestion, retired to their carriage, leaving him to finish his cigar and pay the bill. Mr. Pellett remained for a while wrappped in thought, watching the landscape swim past his window. He was considering closely the problem which had once again become real for him. There seemed to be no doubt that The Presto—that ingenious invention—was having a considerable and peculiar influence on both Spoffin and Palimpsest. It haunted them: they were afraid of it. It really was, apparently, a rival to their claim to existence. And he had left it,

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he remembered with alarm, unprotected on the lawn, in the hope that it would have vanished before his return. Heaven grant that it hadn't. Well, the best thing to do now, he decided, was to rub it in, use it for all it was worth, to confront both Palimpsest and Spoffin with the thing, and then await the result. He rose from his seat, crossed boldly to Palimpsest's table, and sat down opposite him. "I should like to ask you something more, Sir," he began affably, "about your curious mistake regarding my name. Why should you call me by the name of a lawn-mower? It interests me especially because, as it happens, I possess a lawn-mower of that particular brand, The Presto."

Palimpsest stared narrowly at Mr. Pellett, like an animal at bay. At the sound of the word lawn-mower he had flinched, and at the word Presto he had made a sudden violent gesture as if to thrust back some terrible, unseen presence. "There's no such thing," he said in a tone that was almost a hiss. "I know all about lawn-mowers: I deal in them among other things, and I know that the . . . the . . . the one you mentioned doesn't exist. It's a myth, a monstrous invention."

Mr. Pellett smiled benignly. "Monstrous?" he said. "On the contrary, an excellent invention! I know nothing about lawn-mowers, but I know that The Presto exists because, as I have already said, I possess one—a petrol-driven machine of considerable power. If you will call at my house I shall be delighted to show it to you."

I DON'T want to see it," replied Palimpsest with horror. "I should hate to see it. It's bad, thoroughly bad." He used the word *bad* with such vehemence that it seemed that he was referring not to a mere mechanical shortcoming but to some terrible, some diabolical, influence.

Mr. Pellett pricked up his ears. "Ah," he replied with deadly insinuation, "it's bad, you say? Then you admit its existence after all, Mr. Palimpsest?"

Poor Palimpsest's ruddy face was mottled with a sickly pallor. "Well, I'm no mechanic," went on Mr. Pellett pleasantly, "and I'm open to conviction. Come and see mine. Convince me it's bad and I'll get another make."

Again Palimpsest made a gesture of repulsion, but he did not reply. He stared at the cruet-stand at his elbow as if struggling with conflicting emotions. At last he turned. "Yes," he said, as if he had come to some desperate resolution, "yes, I'll come. I'll . . . I'll face it, in fact I'd *like* to have a look at the damned thing."

"Today?" asked Mr. Pellett.

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"No, not today. I have to get home. I live in the country. Next week—next Thursday—I shall be in town. Give me your address."

Mr. Pellett hesitated, then boldly took out his pocketcase and handed him his card. Palimpsest stared at it vaguely. "Pellett!" he muttered. "Pellett! I seem to know the name."

"Oh, no doubt," said Mr. Pellett. "Unlike Palimpsest it's a very common name. I have twelve cousins, all of them called Roger, and all extremely like me." He rose from his seat. "Well," he said, "I shall see you next Thursday. Say five-thirty."

ON his return home, Mr. Pellett was enormously relieved to find The Presto intact. The maids had considerately thrown a large mackintosh sheet over it, and, when he uncovered it, its green, red, and gold shone out with undiminished glory. He now made it his business to become acquainted with it: he carefully read the booklet supplied with it, filled the tank, and boldly started up the engine. It was delightfully simple. Though he had never before driven any kind of motor, Mr. Pellett had not the slightest difficulty in managing The Presto. It became for him at once a delightful plaything, a source of endless entertainment. He treated it with all the affectionate solicitude that a boy gives to his first bicycle. But, despite his pleasure in it, he never lost sight of the imperative ordeal ahead—the confrontation of The Presto with Spoffin and Palimpsest. Palimpsest's appointment was already made: Spoffin had still to be arranged for; and with the object of encountering Spoffin he made a point, during the next two days, of walking twice round King's Square on his way from the office. The second day was a Saturday, and it was a quarter past midday, as he was completing his second tour round the square, that Mr. Pellett encountered the object of his search. Mr. Muggleton Spoffin, in fact, came towards him, under full sail, down the eastern side of the square, evidently just emerged from his home. He did not see Mr. Pellett until that gentleman had spoken to him. "My dear Mr. Spoffin, don't say you have forgotten an old friend. We met, didn't we, a fortnight ago on board ship?"

Mr. Spoffin, once he had collected himself, was equally cordial. He was going, he said, to his club.

"Can't I persuade you to come home to luncheon with me?" asked Mr. Pellett.

Mr. Spoffin regretfully refused. He had a luncheon appointment for half past one at his club.

"One-thirty?" said Mr. Pellett. "But it's only just twelve-fifteen.

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Haven't you time for a glass of sherry at my house? It's on your way."

"Why not?" said Mr. Spoffin. "Why not, my dear Sir?" and they set off together for Mr. Pellett's home.

As luck would have it, Mrs. Pellett was out when they arrived. "Really a very pleasant fellow!" Mr. Pellett thought to himself as he led his friend across the hall, and he was overcome with compunction at the thought that he had lured Mr. Spoffin to his house with the worst intentions. None the less he didn't falter in his design, for that design, he told himself, aimed at no mere selfish satisfaction. Its aim, in fact, was nothing short of the rehabilitation of common sense and the natural laws. He led his guest, or perhaps we should say his victim, into the dining-room, went to the sideboard and poured out a large glass of sherry: that, at least, he could offer in the way of kindness. Then he filled another glass for himself. "Taste that, Mr. Spoffin," he said. "I flatter myself that you'll think it worth your visit."

MR. MUGGLETON Spoffin sniffed, sipped, and his eyes sparkled. "Admirable!" he said, pursing his rosebud mouth. "Now don't tell me. Allow me to guess." He sipped again. "Tio Pepe," he said decisively. "Undoubtedly Tio Pepe. Am I right?"

Mr. Pellett nodded, and his heart warmed disconcertingly towards his innocent victim. "If it were done when 'tis done," he muttered, "then 'twere well it were done quickly."

"I beg your pardon?" Mr. Spoffin raised his eyebrows. His host's sudden lapse from contemporary English and plain speaking had disconcerted him.

But Mr. Pellett was already himself again. "Have another glass?" he said gaily.

Mr. Spoffin held up his hand. "I mustn't, my dear Sir. I have a heavy luncheon before me."

"Poof!" said Mr. Pellett. "What of it? I insist. One more glass!" and he filled Mr. Spoffin's glass to the brim.

Mr. Spoffin yielded gracefully, and again Mr. Pellett's heart smote him. "Poor fellow!" he thought. "It's only human, after all, to give him an anæsthetic. This way, Sir," he said, guiding his victim to the drawing-room. "Before you go, I want to show you a new toy of mine."

The French window was open, and he conducted Mr. Spoffin through it on to the lawn. The Presto stood before them, a vague shape covered by its waterproof sheet. Mr. Pellett stepped up to it, and, like a lord mayor unveiling a statue, smartly whipped off the cover.

The effect on poor Spoffin was

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instantaneous. With a loud cry he shrank back from the thing, as from a hideous spectre, his portly face gone suddenly ashen. "Merciful heaven!" he shrieked, "The P . . . P . . . P . . ."

"The Presto!" said Mr. Pellett with a terrible composure. "A simple and most ingenious machine! Just let me show you."

He seized the handle and started the thing up. But no sooner had he done so than The Presto broke from his grasp, and with a deadly earnestness of purpose made straight for Mr. Spoffin. With another terrified shriek the poor gentleman flung out his hands as if to thrust the machine back, then turned and ran down the lawn. But terror crippled him. He ran with the desperate, ineffectual sloth of a man in a nightmare. The Presto was gaining on him. He stumbled, recovered himself and doubled. But miraculously, incredibly, The Presto doubled too, swung round in less than half its length, and in a moment was on the heels of its prey. Mr. Muggleton Spoffin tripped, fell full length on the lawn, and in a moment The Presto was upon him. Mr. Pellett could watch no longer. He turned away in horror, and covered his face with his hand. There was a last appalling shriek, and then a silence, complete, absolute. Even the sound of the engine had ceased.

MR. PELLETT waited, waited. Then, unable any longer to bear the suspense, he turned and uncovered his eyes. The Presto stood on the spot from which it had started, its mackintosh sheet lay beside it. But to his intense relief there was no corpse. Cleanly and completely Mr. Muggleton Spoffin had vanished.

Mr. Pellett stood gazing at the spot where the victim had fallen, where The Presto had unmistakably caught him, and heaved a profound sigh. "Poor Spoffin!" he said. "Poor Mr. Muggleton Spoffin! I never really believed in him."

He stooped down, took up the mackintosh sheet, carefully covered The Presto, and then flung himself, exhausted, on the garden seat. Though he had not believed in Mr. Spoffin, he had come, during this last half hour, to have a very sincere regard for him, and when Mrs. Pellett found him there twenty minutes later, he was still very much upset.

She took his arm. "My dear," she said, "what can you expect? Half a decanter of Tio Pepe on an empty stomach!"

* * *

DURING the next few days Mr. Pellett went about his affairs feeling that he had passed through a severe illness. He was shaken in mind and body. But, though already better, he was by no means completely recovered,

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and there was still another ordeal before him. He waited uneasily, apprehensively, for the day of reckoning with Palimpsest. By a series of devices so artful that she did not suspect them, he arranged that Mrs. Pellett should have an engagement away from home on the afternoon of Palimpsest's visit, and so, when the bell rang aggressively on that Thursday afternoon, Mr. Pellett was alone in the drawing-room.

It was apparent from Mr. Palimpsest's manner and appearance, when the maid ushered him in, that his visit was not a friendly one. But Mr. Pellett greeted him with great urbanity. "Ah, here you are, Mr. Palimpsest. Delighted to see you, I'm sure. You've had tea?"

Palimpsest made a violent gesture. "Never touch the stuff," he said fiercely.

"Then a whiskey-and-soda?"

"Show me that damned machine of yours," said Palimpsest recklessly. "That's what I've come for."

Mr. Pellett led him towards the drawing-room window. "As you wish," he said. "This way, please." He conducted his visitor on to the lawn where The Presto stood coolly waiting. Mr. Pellett went up to it. "Allow me to show you."

But Palimpsest pushed him rudely aside. "Leave it to me," he said.

Mr. Pellett went to the garden seat and sat down. After all, there was nothing for him to do but leave the two of them together and await the outcome.

Palimpsest snatched off the mackintosh sheet and looked the machine over contemptuously. "As I thought," he said, "the thing's a sham."

"Indeed no!" Mr. Pellett replied calmly from his seat. "Far from it! Anything but! I assure you, Mr. Palimpsest, it has done excellent work, *very* excellent work, during the past week."

Unpleasantly impressed by the grim emphasis of Mr. Pellett's diction, Palimpsest glanced round at him with sharp suspicion; then, turning again to the machine, he tried to start it. But it wouldn't start. To Mr. Pellet's dismay, the thing sat there impassive, lifeless, totally unresponsive to Palimpsest's ministrations. Could it be that it was no match for its fiery, red-haired opponent that it was going to let its owner, its creator, down? Mr. Pellett glanced at it with sudden misgiving, and, to his anxious scrutiny, it seemed that its green had paled, its scarlet faded to a effeminate pink.

Mr. Palimpsest laboured away feverishly, cursing as he labcured. "A swindle!" he growled. "A damned hoax!" And to Mr. Pellett's horror he began to kick The Presto. He kicked the petrol-

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tank, the grass box, the complicated structure of working-parts, and at every drum-beat of his kicks Mr. Pellett's heart froze. The green and scarlet paint began to flake away: already the thing looked worse than second-hand. Then, with a snarl like a tiger's, Palimpsest pounced on The Presto, leapt upon it simultaneously with hands, knees, feet, and teeth. There was a clattering, a jingling of broken metal. In a few minutes, obviously, the machine would be nothing more than a heap of scrap-iron. The situation was critical. But, as we have seen already, Mr. Pellett was a man of action, a born tactician; and now he acted. He had no thoughts, no schemes. He simply acted instinctively. He leapt from his seat, snatched from his pocket a pen-knife, of which he opened the larger blade, and rushed into the thick of it. He sprang upon the crouching Palimpsest, and without a moment's hesitation drove the knife into his back. He felt the struggling body beneath him pause and stiffen. Perched on the broad back, he waited, waited, till it seemed a whole minute had gone by. Then he slid his feet to the ground and stood up. As he did so, Palimpsest with a horrible, hoarse cry, rolled off the machine, rolled on to his back on the lawn, and lay there writhing and howling. "Help! Help! Murder!" he roared; and gradually, as Mr. Pellett stood watching him, white faced, appalled, his voice grew weaker, higher, till soon it was no more than a thin, querulous, childish whine. Mr. Pellett, sweating with horror, threw a terrified glance at the windows of the house. Thank God, the servants hadn't heard: not a soul was there. But at that moment he heard a shrill, persistent whistle from the lane at the bottom of the garden, then the snap of the garden door. He turned and saw a policeman running towards him across the lawn. Mr. Pellett's legs gave way, and he sat down on the grass.

THE policeman, bidding him stay where he was, knelt down beside the gasping Palimpsest and took out his note-book, and Mr. Pellett was appalled to hear his victim desperately, between his gasps, dictate his name and his fantastic address. Syllable by syllable he got it out—Calceolaria Grove, Hobbleton-in-Sloke.

"County?" asked the policeman remorsely.

With a horrible spasm the murdered man gathered together his last atom of energy. "Hant!" he shouted, and fell back lifeless.

The policeman closed his note-book and turned to Mr. Pellett. "Now then," he began, "What have you got to say?"

Mr. Pellett rose from the grass.

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His teeth were set, he was desperately calm. As he sat on the grass he had been gathering together the full power of his will. "What have I got to say?" he repeated. "Not much. These modern lawn-mowers . . ."

"We'll come to the lawn-mower presently," said the constable. "What about the corpse, and this pen-knife?" He held out Mr. Pellett's open pen-knife.

Mr. Pellett stared him calmly in the face. "I fail to understand you," he said. "The knife is certainly mine, but I have not noticed a corpse."

"Not noticed a corpse, 'aven't cher?" said the policeman.

"Well," said Mr. Pellett, "the lawn-mower might certainly be called a corpse, but I see no other. Look for yourself."

The policeman turned, and Mr. Pellett, in the joy of his heart, actually laughed out loud. For his will had conquered. There *was* no corpse. The policeman, thunderstruck, stared stupidly at the grass, then at Mr. Pellett. For a moment he said nothing: then he turned a baffled, frightened gaze on Mr. Pellett. "Are you a conjurer?" he asked.

Mr. Pellett smiled amicably. "It's you, Constable, who are the conjurer, if you can turn a mackintosh sheet into a corpse." He pointed to the mackintosh sheet that lay on the grass beside the remains of The Presto.

The policeman took out his note-book again and opened it. "Mackintosh sheets don't give names and addresses," he said surlily, showing his notes to Mr. Pellett.

Mr. Pellett read the familiar address; but so firm now was his hold on reality that he read it without a qualm. "Are you . . . er . . . ? Is this . . . er . . . a joke, Constable?" he asked.

"A joke?" The policeman tried, but failed, lamentably failed, to put an angry dignity into his voice.

"You know as well as I do," said Mr. Pellett sternly, "that this is not a serious name and address. Palimpsest, indeed!"

They heard the garden door open. A police-sergeant had arrived, in belated answer, no doubt, to the whistle. "I fear you're a little unwell," whispered Mr. Pellett to the constable. "I should tear out that page, if I were you, and say no more about if. I won't give you away: trust me."

THE policeman, now thoroughly cowed, tore out the page from his note-book and crumpled it up. "Here, give it to me," said Mr. Pellett, snatching it and putting it in his pocket. "Now, pull yourself together, Constable."

They turned and faced the sergeant. Mr. Pellett explained that he had got into difficulties,

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alarming and painful difficulties, with his new lawn-mower.

"New?" said the sergeant, surveying the wreckage.

"It was new ten minutes ago," said Mr. Pellett.

The sergeant smiled. "You seem to be a gentleman with a sharp temper, Sir."

Mr. Pellett assented gaily. "So sharp," he said, "that it attracted the attention of the constable here, who, I suppose, was out in the lane. I can well believe that the noise sounded suspicious."

Mr. Pellett accompanied the police to the garden door, where they parted on the best of terms. When the two officers apologised for their intrusion, Mr. Pellett waved a benignant hand, and replied that he was reassured to know that he was so well looked after. When he had closed the door upon them, he proceeded to a shed, took out a spade, and reverently buried the remains of The Presto in a corner of the garden; and when Mrs. Pellett returned home, shortly before dinner, he received her with an affectionate exuberance that almost alarmed her.

Thenceforward life resumed its normal course; but Mr. Pellett, pedant that he was, was not yet completely satisfied, and he took the trouble, one day, to waylay an errand-boy, or, rather, a middle-aged errand-man, who was emerging into Yorrick Street from the gate of number 13 King's Square with a basket on his arm. "Would you mind telling me," he asked politely, "the name of the gentleman who lives here?"

"Mr. Harrington," replied the man.

"Mr. Harrington? A recent arrival?"

The man smiled. "Depends what you calls recent, Sir," he said. "Mr. Harrington's lived here these fifteen years, to *my* knowledge."

Mr. Pellett thanked him. Yet even now he was not quite satisfied. A few months later he removed the offices of Messrs. Pellett, Pellett & Pellett to what he considered a more salubrious quarter of the town.

THE END

When answering an advertisement be sure to say you saw it in FANTASTIC

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THE TEACHERS RODE A WHEEL OF FIRE

By ROGER ZELAZNY

Illustrator SUMMERS

The moon appeared to fall from the sky. All living things grew silent in frightened anticipation.

WHEN he looked up and saw a moon of blood spinning in the daytime sky he dropped his piece of fruit.

The moon had never come down before. The sun still hung where it belonged. Had one of them given birth to this whirling offspring?

He spat the unchewed pulp from his mouth and stared upward.

It was larger than either parent now, and had lost some of its fire. Distantly, he heard a sound, like the singing of the tiny night-things.

It spun, it wheeled—its last fires vanishing—and the smooth grayness of its sides glistened,

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like a stone at the bottom of a stream.

It grew until the sky was full of it, and then the spinning ceased. It hung near overhead, where the low-flying birds go.

He hid within a clump of bushes.

As delicately as the purring ones dip their whiskers, it hovered over the open space, then bent the tall grasses downward.

It settled, and the birds grew quiet.

Peering through leaves, he watched as its side sprang open.

Two things walked out, striding down the smooth, gray slope.

They were shaped similarly to himself, and walked upright, as he did. But they were dark, like the trees, with a glistening row of stones up the front of their darkness. Their feet looked black and hard, without toes; their hands were light-colored, and shaped like his.

They breathed deeply and looked about. They stared at his bush.

"He didn't run away, but he's afraid to come out?"

"Wouldn't you be?"

"Guess so."

The strange noises they made! Like the animals!

"Let's see if we can interest him.

They spread something white upon the ground. One of them took a sac-like thing from his middle. He opened it above the whiteness.

Little colored stones, like the eggs of birds, rolled out.

ONE of them bent forward and, with a sweeping gesture, picked up one of the stones. He held it high, then slowly brought it down toward his face. He deposited it in his mouth and chewed vigorously. Afterwards, he patted his stomach.

The other one did the same thing.

They were eating!

They looked at his bush again.

His mouth watered. He thought of the sweet fruit he had dropped.

They moved away from the whiteness; they went back to the fallen moon that no longer shone.

Should he? Should he go out and eat one of the colored things? They were so good! They had both patted their stomachs!

He pushed the leaves aside, watching. They were both looking in the other direction.

He moved, placing his feet soundlessly. He approached the whiteness.

They were still looking off in the other direction.

He scooped up a heap of the colored things and ran back to his bush.

He turned and looked back. They had not noticed.

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Eagerly, he popped one into his mouth. It was sweet, sweeter than fruit-flesh. He threw all of them into his mouth at once. He noticed then that his moist palm had turned many colors. He licked it. It was sweet too.

He wanted more.

The things looked back at the whiteness. They moved toward it. This time the other one took something from his belt. Little brown squares fell from the sac.

Again, they made a great show of how good they tasted. His mouth watered for more sweetness.

This time, though, they did not go all the way back to the moon. They only went part of the way, then sprawled upon the ground. They were not watching the bush.

Should he try it again?—they seemed very careless with their treasures.

He stole forth a few feet—they paid no attention.

He picked up a brown square and ate it quickly—they did not notice.

He ate some more.

How good! Better even than the little colored stones!

Gulping, he stuffed more and more into his mouth.

One of them was looking at him, but did not move. He did not seem to care.

Squatting, he ate everything again.

The one who had been watching him took another sac from his middle and tossed it.

He jumped to his feet.

But the sac fell to the whiteness, and the two showed no signs of getting up.

He picked up the sac and tore it open.

More things fell out, all of them good to eat.

He ate them and hurried away into the woods.

THE next day there were other good things for him to eat, spread out upon the whiteness. The two sat on the grass, watching him, occasionally making small noises. But they never attacked him. They never threw stones or tried to hit him. After several days, he grew used to them, and sometimes sat staring back.

How strange they were! Giving away food like that!

Then, along with the food, one day, there was something else.

He studied it.

It was a stone on the end of a stick, held, somehow, by a strip of animal skin.

As he gulped the food, he studied it through the corner of his eye.

The stone was oddly-shaped—thick and heavy on one end, with an edge on the other. It was a good stone. He had never seen one like it.

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He picked it up and the stick came with it.

They were watching him very closely.

Why had they put that silly stick onto it? He tugged at, but it resisted his efforts.

When he looked up again, one of them was holding one just like it. It placed a piece of wood on the ground and used the stone on the stick to strike it. Finally, the piece of wood was cut in half.

—Yes! He could see that it was a good stone, he did not have to be shown!

He raised it to his mouth and chewed through the animal skin. He threw the stick away.

A very good stone!

One of them groaned.

"Early tool-destroying stage," it noised.

"Shut up, Cal," said the other.

It brandished its own stone high, holding it by the stick. It pointed to the stick.

Did they want the stone back? He decided to pretend he did not really want it.

Casually, he tossed the stone away, throwing it over his shoulder. He was careful to aim it at the clump of bushes, where he could find it later.

Then he went back into the woods.

The next day, a stick, held bent by another strip of hide, lay before him on the whiteness —and many other little pointed sticks, with feathers tied to them.

One of the things stood by the moon, throwing the little sticks with the bent one. He made them stick into a piece of wood hanging from a tree limb.

How stupid to use little pointed sticks—when a thrown stone would smash out brains so much easier!

He ate the food and left the sticks where they lay. He did not touch them.

THE following day there were no more sticks and stones with his food. But the one gray thing kept slapping its breast and pointing to itself, making a noise that sounded like, "Cal."

The other did the same thing, making the noise, "Dom."

Perhaps they were possessed, like the holy one who had been dropped on his head as a baby. Thinking of him, he remembered to carry off some of the little brown squares for an offering.

"Let's give up, Dom. He can't get the idea of words or tools."

"I guess you're right. He's just not far enough along. Maybe, someday . . ."

"Sure, we'll write it up in the report."

They went back to the fallen moon; the hole in its side closed behind them. After a while the sound began again, and the moon rose above the ground.

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It moved to a treetop height.

He hid himself in the bushes.

It began to turn, to spin, moving higher. Softly, the glow began.

It became a bloody moon once more, spinning, turning . . .

He watched for a long, long while.

Then something happened inside his head.

He looked about the ground and found a flat, round stone. He looked up at the spinning disc, then set the stone on its edge. He gave it a push, and it began to roll.

When it fell, he set it upright and pushed it again.

He looked up and the moon with its gray things was gone.

Then he looked for the straight stick he had thrown away.

When he found it, he looked for another round stone, and the chewed piece of rawhide.

—It might not fall if there were two of them, one fastened to each end . . .

THE END

COMING NEXT MONTH

Where's that old-time fantasy? Where's that old *Unknown* kind of story? Flatly we state that you will find it in the November issue of FANTASTIC, in our new novel by **Jack Sharkey** which is unabashedly titled, *It's Magic, You Dope!* Not only has the frantic Sharkey mind outdone itself in conjuring up as wild a plot and a collection of plotters as fantasy has witnessed in many moons, but cover artist Lloyd Birmingham has likewise outdone *himself* in creating a cover (1.) you will want to frame.

And more! For the November FANTASTIC also features the great Edgar Wallace's Fantasy Classic, *Planetoid 127;* as well as short stories, and all our regular departments.

November FANTASTIC will be on sale at newsstands October 18.

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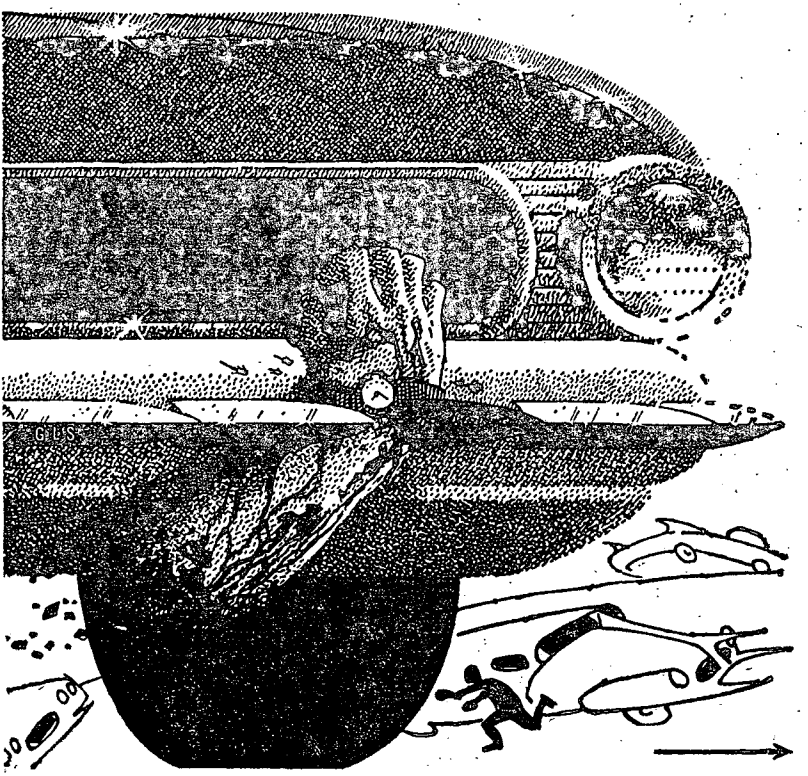
An Orwellian glance at the future of the pedestrian, as he plays his appointed role in

AUTOGEDDON

By GEOFFRY WAGNER

Illustrator SCHELLING



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"We are building a nation for automobiles rather than one for people." John Keats, The Insolent Chariots.

"Either the motor car will drive us all out of our cities or the cities will have to drive out the motor car." Lewis Mumford, Speech to the 13th International Congress of Local Authorities at The Hague.

DON'T be an accomplice! In the words of. . . ."

The girl driving touched the button for the slow-speed lane. They were approaching home-park. An obstruction detector winked briefly. Salibelle Decker yawned. The girl beside her said shortly, "Sure you want me over?"

"Sure, Ruth. Why, we haven't talked since Smithmore. You know, I never really understood. . . ."

"Anybody, in the words of Supreme Postulant," broke in the announcer again, *"doing nothing* is guilty of. . . ." The car waited for a traffic break and static intervened. "Now, folks, if you need crutches. . . ."

The girl at the controls rolled a dial. Nearly home. She sank against the cushions, flipped loose her seat-belt as the panel flashed SLOWING, and let the automatic controls nose the car into their park-place. PARKED, throbbed a legend before her.

"It was funny meeting you like that, Ruthie. I often wondered. . . ." She pushed the button marked out and the turbines cut. Together the two walked through the cathedral-like gloom in silence. "Imagine, you living right here in the same city."

"Well, not all the time," Ruth corrected.

In the elevator Sally said, "I never really got to know you at Smithmore, did I?" She bit her lip, wanting to add, Did anyone?

Ruth Marsh said nothing. They took another elevator, this marked UNY 23/35-85, and she opened her mouth to ease the popping of her ears. Her conditioning had never been good. Her friend gestured gaily past the photo-electric cell and they went into the 79th floor apartment, smiling. It was a cheerful room, a view of the river from one end.

"What'll you have to drink?"

AFTER Sally had fixed soft drinks they lounged on the ottoman. They hadn't seen each other in years. Sally had frequently wondered what had become of the dark haggard girl who was so good in Psych—in those days before the subject had been abolished. And then to pass her at a traffic-island like that.

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She moved on to her tummy and stole a glance at her former crush. Why, Ruth looked almost ill now. Was she all right, chain-smoking like that, despite the Postulant's edict? To cover something of their mutual shyness Sally tripped the wall-to-wall t.v.

Suddenly she was laughing. "Hit him! Gee, get him. *Gettim!*" she nearly squealed, her thighs threshing in their jeans. Ruth watched with pallor, her fingers straightening a pleat in her skirt.

"Oh no!" Sally lunged till her exuberant curves seemed to burst her sweater. The screen showed a dumpy figure in the conventional yellow dodging behind the upright of a fuel pylon, while a Hydra 78 screamed down at speed. "Missed!"

Some anger, loss of faith, silenced her for a second. Still Ruth Marsh said nothing. Then she asked, "Isn't that the Village area?"

Sally nodded. "Dad told me they cleaned up most of that part of town back in the seventies but there are still some streets down there which aren't straight. I think that's horrible."

"The only place he's got a chance, I guess."

"Oh sure." She glanced at her watch. "Dad will be home at four, I know he'd like to meet you." Kicking off her sneaks she squirmed towards the screen again. "Gee, the underpass is blocked. That guy will have to get across Zero yet. Ouch!"

She grinned as she blinked. On the screen an oncoming Decimator had flashed its quadruple dazzelites at the elderly ped racing for his life to the next island. "These educational documentaries are getting pretty realistic, huh. That must have hurt." Turning a knob she dimmed the screen. In conspicuous yellow denims the pedestrian had removed his pince-nez as he stood perched on the island; for a second he pressed finger and thumb to the balls of his eyes, as if to erase the very faculty of vision there. Cars streamed by, the motorists inside could be seen yelling and jeering. "Can't stay *there* for ever."

As Salibelle spoke the NO STANDING sign flashed alive over the island and the ped leapt at the first warning current.

"And that's nothing to what he's got coming if he stays put."

She chuckled. In a minute the second shot would travel through the island, strong enough to fling the ped into the heyway again. But already he was on the run, a rabbity dart across the asphalt ocean to another pylon where he could be seen to pause, panting.

"This is getting exciting, let's have a little sound."

With her toe she pressed a button on the floor and gradually the street sounds invaded the apart-

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ment room, the muffled roar of the rocket engines mixing with the recorded Carty voices—*"Get that ped!* Supreme Postulant. . . ." Yet another button and the odor of oil pervaded the room. "Reward for. . . ."

RUTH MARSH was not looking at the screen. She was staring at her friend. The fair hair sliced short in the fashion of the carqueens of the day, the unbruised regularity of feature, even the trim little can that twitched at the antics of the fleeing ped, what a contrast Sally's appearance made to her own. She had always been handicapped by looking "unusual." That sidetooth she had lost in a carkill a year ago had only intensified her bony cheeks, and she was too broke to get it replaced. Then suddenly she sat forward abruptly.

A rakish Goldsmobile, its serrated fenders hung with a sign "School's Out—DRIVE FAST!", had just hurtled past the ped, missing him by millimeters. And then it was, bleeding slightly from some passing 3-way fin, the man seemed to become aware that his actions were being telly-eyed to the public. In any case, his frightened face stared full into the Carty camera for a second.

Ruth said, "Wait a minute. I did a course under. . . ." She broke off, got up. "Turn the sound down. That's Professor Eldridge."

Salibelle smiled. "Most of these anti-auto subs are teachers."

A V-29 with saber-tooth grille was coming . . . Ruth gripped her elbows. Suddenly, with a surprisingly agile movement, the man ducked. A frenzied jerk, a disc of skidding metal, and he had shot into a pedhole to vanish from the street. Sally humped her shoulders, reached for a knob. The wall-screen faded, the room was silent. "Don't worry, Ruthie. The Carty'll get him. They always do. They've sworn they'll crush that movement fast."

Ruth was quivering. At Sally's fingertouch a button glowed again and one wall slid back, revealing a Dreamola Vorphoon 11.

"Like it? My birthday present, sort of."

The parked car shone. Ruth watched as Sally padded barefoot to it and started to polish the hood. Massaging would have been a better term for the activity, Ruth thought, with aching head. Sally buffed the outstretched steel softly, crooning a little as she rubbed. There was a shelfload of trophies (a ped's hat, several dead birds, an old Ferrari Testa Rossa taillight) which gave Ruth a sudden pang, reminding her of the autovic that had wiped out her parents.

Salibelle rubbed more slowly,

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calling what seemed to be pet names, Chicky, Coney, My Great Big Man. She paused to lower the wraparound windshield and flicked on the rear-seat hide-a-bed T.V. "Like it?" She smiled at Ruth. "The new Kramlers even have a ping-pong set in back, isn't it crazy."

And the Conquistador Vehements, Ruth wanted to add, came supplied with electrocution devices. She felt sick. "What's happening in the chase?" she asked hoarsely.

"Oh, they've got him going into some Faculty Convocation Room. Gosh, that gang is even petitioning for subways. As if we don't need every inch of space for heyways in the city. How unpatriotic can you get." But she spoke boredly, her breath hissing as her fingers trailed on a water-smooth muffler. "A coat like shot silk though I say it myself. If you like, we could take my manbird here out and. . . ." But she was talking to air. For a moment Sally stared. Then on chubby feet she padded to the apartment door. "Well, what do you know!" she exclaimed to herself. Her friend had flown. A normal person, she thought, would at least have said she was feeling faint, or something.

IN Convocation Room overlooking the big Barnes Parkplatz the elderly figure in yellow rubbed and replaced his pince-nez. A close shave, very. Standing by the window, Cornelius Eldridge could see the rivers of steel flowing down the heyways. That Hydra 78 just now . . . thank God he'd spotted the pedhole in time. After all the secrecy was it possible they'd heard about the meeting this evening? He had to get through to the meeting. There were the papers to deliver, he could feel them virtually burning beneath his denims. The last link in their carefully co-ordinated plan.

Scholars said the automobile armageddon had erupted in Fremont, N.C., but Cornelius considered it a moot point at best. The other cities of the Union had certainly not lagged behind. The story was that a Parthenon Forty, driven by some diligent dentist, it seemed, was making fast for Burgaw via Goldsboro. On the Gath Grateway beyond Goldsboro the mother-of-pearl anodized aluminum fender struck an obscure steamfitter called Kemton, whose own, more modest Corsicana IV had stalled some yards up the way. Kemton was bounced over the ramp and dumped in the direction of an underpass below. By a fluke of fate his body was caught as it fell by an approaching Eldorado Eighty, manned by a sleeping widow who had set her controls at a clean two hundred. Because of some

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malfunctioning of the old-fashioned obstruction detector the corpse had been carried miles before the car came to a halt by a compulsory MAX NORM intercepter (*Absolutely No Slowing*), which had alerted the police. Practically nothing of Kemton remained identifiable. He was recognized by his car.

In a decent courtroom overlooking a lava of Glowmobiles, a sober Judge had subsequently ruled that Kemton had been walking on a "non-pedestrian vehicular traveltray" or "pure carriage-aisle" (of the kind to be dubbed heyways by the Carty later). In short, Kemton had been guilty of walking.

Looking back on the accident —a word to be replaced by the meliorative *autovic* or *carkill*— Cornelius suspected that the learned Judge's ruling had merely confirmed the public opinion of the day. Even by that date jay-walking was punishable by six months in leg-irons at the feed-belt, and Kemton's death was treated as a joke by the tabloids. DENTIST CAUSES CAVITIES was one headline Cornelius' research had uncovered, another —BODY DISSOLVED BY DENTIST— *Steam Let Out Of Fitter On Gateway*. Still, the Kemton case had "triggered" — Cornelius could still wince at tabloidese—a chain of anti-pedestrian legislation. Courts increasingly favored motorists over peds whenever the twain did meet. The famous old Swedish *Vägmarker* of the fifties, now enshrined in Carty Museums, immunizing motorists against legal action from pedestrians on certain thruways, turned into a cozy joke about a vanished age. And now, and now . . . yes, through the window, beyond the rocket-car monument, he could see what had once been Eighth Street, eight-abreast no-slow one-way traffic. Zero Avenue meeting it was a chainway of destination-dialed autos, dotted with almost sarcastically situated pedestrian islands, pulsing with turbines and quivering with hairline halts.

CORNELIUS glanced nervously around. The room was empty but for an elderly lady of faint familiarity; surely he had met her at some scholarly gathering or other, a refugee from Berkeley in Economics, or possibly Physics. The sight of her yellow denims reassured him, however. What's more, wasn't that the latest casualty list she had in her hand? After all, was their plan so very subversive? They merely wanted to recapture and seal off that disused section of the old IRT for the use of peds; no violence, of course. Cornelius in particular was against violence. It just seemed a waste to fill up those quaint, and really

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rather charming, old subways with obsolescent cars. Dammit, John Betjeman had dedicated his dying poem to the BMT. But of course the economy. . . .

Cornelius sighed. It hadn't been long after the appearance of the first ped casualty lists that the Lancinator had been brought out, then that Monarch with the first throw-aside grille. *Drivers Manuals* had been completely rewritten, of course. Then had come the first wounding awards and, incredible as it might seem, the Postulant himself had blessed the first Misanthrope 20 with its exhaust ports converted into nothing short of flame-throwing devices. A scream from the far side of the square—was it really a yell of pain or the screech of brakes?—threw suddenly into Cornelius' mind that melancholy intellectual face which had so often haunted his dreams. Much too young for him, of course, but far and away the best student he'd had in any pro-seminar. Pity how you lost sight of them like that. He had been unable to forget her keen, sculpted face.

BEHIND him came the quick whisper of zipped denims. The lady Economist appeared to be leaving. Could he risk a glance at the papers? Convocation Room was said not to be tellyscreened. But the Carty were everywhere, he would have to be careful.

Cornelius rose on his toes. Was it not St. Louis that had passed the first of the new capital punishment laws? Then it had been the North Carolina courts that had refined these somewhat by having the condemned stand at a wall while a truck backed on him slowly. Mincing the shinbones to marrow between fenders was simply a Montana eccentricity. And of course it was only in Georgia that the individual to be executed was tied under an amphibous Ventnova on marshy ground—burial alive as the machine sank slowly on him from above. They said it took a night. No, no, New York remained relatively humane. The new amputation devices were still definitely outlawed.

Patting the wedge of papers, Cornelius suddenly found the opposite wall wavering before him. Fear spidered his spine. The neat Economist had merely moved to a coffee fountain at the far end of the room. And in the half-open "academic" briefcase left on her chair Cornelius had seen the glint of apparatus. Instruments of steel utterly unconnected, you might say, with scholarly pursuits. With drying throat he recognized the record er, and the nose of a most effective Carty automatic. Dear God. He didn't hesitate. He walked out at once.

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AT the front door, superscribed LUX ET VERITAS, he became stupefyingly aware of the customary sustained roaring from the street. Again his mind fled incongruously back to that girl. Why, she might have been from another world. What was her name? Ruth . . . Ruth . . . the traffic slid past him here on MEDIUM tracks, electronics at the helm. He noticed the electrocution device on the barbed hubcap of a passing Hupercar. An expensive extra, that. But the rewards in some States were good. Cornelius had seen a body —what was left of it—black. Ugh!

In these seconds of freedom he stared with despair. He had so loved the world. There was still time, still a chance. Blood and motor oil, they didn't mix. And suddenly he remembered another body, his mother's, eviscerated by a Carona 10, to another patriotic cheer. Footsteps clicked behind him. He tugged tight his zips.

"License, bub."

Cornelius' fingers jellied as he produced his ped card. An Eliminator 90 whooshed by. He remembered the sick joke of the students before the braking had been perfected on those first Excaliburs—that they came supplied with a palette knife to wipe you off the windshield when you stopped.

"Get cut crossing, Jack?"

For the first time Cornelius remembered his bandaged hand. "I'm afraid so, officer," he said ruefully. Miraculously the man was returning his license. "I think it was an Aggressor Epic in Twentieth Way," Cornelius daringly added.

"O.K., well, take it easy, ped. Frankly, I wouldn't have minded much if that Aggie had had you. There's a bunch of pro-ped subs they're cleaning up this part of town right now and believe me, those monkeys are going to look like so much heyway time we finished with them."

Smiling, agreeing, Cornelius bad him farewell, stepping out smartly onto the moving sidewalk which spirited him rapidly away. In a matter of minutes that woman would have them after him again. The only thing to do was cross. Quickly he made for the shadow of a freight entrance. His glasses were beaded with sweat. Crossing was an ordeal. The University had forbidden fraternities to use the task as a pledging gimmick years ago. Cornelius extracted his ped-scope and scanned. Then he made his dash.

He had reached the ledge comprising the far sidewalk when it happened. A belling went through the street like wind, a sound with clatter in it that made the panting professor

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whirl. Fractionally too late he flung himself on the nearest entrance. Idiot, he reproved himself as the round Hermatic glided by. He should have recognized that one by now, the klaxon designed to make peds jump, lose their balance on sideways and the like. A pain pierced his arm. Operating a torque-flite button the driver had extruded a rapier antenna, a combination device to improve back-seat T.V. and cut unwary peds. It was a light stab, but it hurt. Cornelius cursed, dabbing at the tell-tale blood already seeping down his side as he nipped onto the other moving way.

As he did so a voice filled the street. Mocking laughter was followed by an avuncular address system—"Oho, we're coming to get you, ped. Ho! Ho! Ho!"

CORNELIUS felt his vision tremble. The Carty speaker at the intersection seemed to vibrate mockingly at him—"That's right, keep moving, ped. You're going to need all the start you can get."

He tried to raise his right arm, push closer to the wall, and was astonished at how slackly his cut limb jarred. A splash of plaster on the wall above his head. And again the laughter. Cornelius felt suddenly tired. If he was caught with these papers, there was a certain method of pedextermination. . . .

They started their horns on him now, like beasts denied their prey, since the raised belt offered fleeting protection. The seconds ticked tenuously over Cornelius' brain. He felt drunk with weakness, and smiled to himself. Make it—he had to make it. The smell of oil. The street swam. Collect himself. Blots of darkness swelled at the corners of his eyes. God. God.

Suddenly an underpass opened and Cornelius flung himself in. Hard to track him here. A spot of luck at last. For what seemed a long time, a period of eclipse when nothing would come real, Cornelius clung against the city wall. Then he saw that the steps ahead led up to one of the last cab-ramps in this part of town. NY 7-84 he read, panting.

It was consonant with the darkening of his consciousness, the passionate unreality of his sense of danger, that Cornelius felt it natural for the first cab's door there to swing open, and it did not seem odd to find inside (while the storm-god of another overhead Carty megaphone roared, *"Courage, ped!"*) an elongated inky head, a vivid face showing a missing tooth when the girl said almost crossly, "Get in, *hurry!* There's time. I'm Ruth Marsh. Your Psych seminar, remember?"

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When Cornelius opened his eyes in that brooding tunnel what he saw first was the pointed shoes of the driver. The man was dozing while the cab was carried on its guided way. Cornelius tried to sit up straight. His whole body ached. Perhaps that antenna had been poisoned.

"The Birch?"

She shook her head. "This is the McCarthy Tunnel. I thought if maybe we could get across to New Jersey there'd be a chance . . . I mean, the range. . . ."

Cornelius took off his pince-nez in a prim, professorial gesture that made the gaunt girl beside him grin, again exposing the gap in her teeth at the side. "Miss Marsh, just how did you . . . ?"

"You were live. Evidently they were giving it as part of some citizenship lesson. The Carty channel said some organization was being crushed out and, of course," she smiled faintly, "a real-life chase makes for so much better viewing entertainment."

His head drooped. "Was it? Ah yes. Just the Reform Movement. But tell me why," he began again. "Why you, that is. . . ."

"I felt the same way," she said after a moment.

There was silence but for the onrush of the machine in that breathless corridor. The soft whooshing reminded Cornelius of some whisper from the mouth of a Titanic seashell, when he was a child, by the shore, before all the beaches had been tarmacadamized, at the Postulant's order, Supreme Postulant's supreme . . . was he really dying?

"I hardly imagined you cut out for grand roles, Miss Marsh."

"You were hurt. I wanted to help."

SUDDENLY her face went hard. Cornelius felt her hand in a pocket of his denims. The hand emerged holding a pedhole wrench. Mistily, with drowning comprehension, he watched her as with a great breath—*"There!"*—she whunked the instrument on the back of the driver's skull in front. The man slumped sideways on his seat.

"What?" cried Cornelius.

She pointed. The screen of the driver's T.V. was flickering and showed nothing less than the back of a cab in the McCarthy Tunnel—*their cab.*

"That way, you can watch your own death," she said decidedly. Cornelius leant over, dialed FAST LANE and let the autopilot continue.

"I can't really drive," he said, thinking—No violence, that was a pity.

She said, "We can get through the automatic toll onto the traveltray all right. If we can only lose them there, sometimes if

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you juggle these cancelling buttons." He let her play with the things in a daze, then by a fuel pylong past the automatic tollgate said gently, "I think I'll deal with him." She managed to stop the car and Cornelius wrestled the man out and left him under the towering projection.

They roared on.

New Jersey was concrete to the Monroe County missile stations, the far side of the Delaware. Over this metallized plain the lights were rising. There were cars everywhere, like herds of buffalo, seemingly racing together, then deflected or waiting automatically on their regulated chainways. Ruth and Cornelius swooshed directionlessly along, as if in some heavy typhoon, passing all kinds of cars, many driverless, summoned from distant sources. Curfew had closed. There was not a ped in sight.

"Have you seen a horse?" he asked, holding his side. "I mean a live one, not just in pictures of the past."

She pressed his arm. The traveltray had turned into a convention of autos, scarcely a township, but there were fuel stops about, automats, and mobile Carty units. They swung by and were a matter of twenty miles beyond when Cornelius saw the wreckage in the adjacent lane.

"Stop," he cried. "Someone may be hurt."

She said so fiercely he stared at her, "What do you owe to *them?*"

But he managed to persuade her. Although it was forbidden, they pulled up. The Golds had been involved in a lurid smash on its guided way. It reminded Cornelius of reproductions of that old surrealist art he had once come across in the library In city suit the driver's body had been completely castrated and bluish intestines bulged about. In its forward flight the man's left leg had been ripped off by a control knob, while the shatterproof windshield had sheared both arms at different places. The front T.V. switch had been responsible for obliterating the face of his companion, a body sexless at first sight but found to be that of a girl whose kneecaps had been mushed into jelly, whose kidneys were immodestly on display, and whose torso had in one place been reduced to literal inches by the folded steel.

"They'll be identified by their car," Cornelius said weakly. Trying to open what was left of the rear door he must have tripped the circuit of the hi-fi since the Carty song, tops in pops for years, suddenly filled the air—*The Awt-O-Mo-Beel Arma-Ged'*. . . . To this bizarre accompaniment he gave a shocked look in the lifeless, bloodspat-

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tered back of the car, and the simulated staircase there.

"The new battle hymn of the Republic," the girl said sharply.

CORNELIUS glanced at her again. Then with another darkening of his consciousness he heard them, too. There was something indescribably different between the noise made by an auto in natural transit and one coming to eradicate you. They ran for the cab.

"Get it going," he heard himself pleading. Behind, the music was still brazenly playing, as if in triumph ("So rocket your baby . . . Down Sui-cide Seven"). Already the oncoming dazzelites made Cornelius blink. The first klaxons shrieked.

"I can't," she cried hopelessly, stabbing wildly at the instrument panel. WAITING glowed the selector. But the destination signals failed to respond. Only the front seat T.V. came alive, showing them the picture of themselves fighting the controls. WAITING . . . WAITING. . . .

"But, Ruth, you must," he strove to say calmly, "after all, you've driven. You must have learnt, to graduate."

She beat, sobbing, at the panel. "Not this model. Something's wrong." Lights flickered, the chassis seemed to rise, once perfume could be smelt, but the car couldn't be got to move. Cornelius tried to help—"Seat-ejector button, you idiot," she wailed. "I'm sorry, Professor Eldridge, but I can't, I can't. . . ."

"And rocket your ba-ha-by. . . ."

Over the lake of lead the cars were coming closer. High overhead a couple of Carty hovercraft could be witnessed approaching now. Cornelius said quickly, "Damn." He could see himself in the T.V. screen, they had actually isolated his face to a sweating image of impotence and as he saw this mask, something hardened within him. He took her hand. The papers.

"Ruth, let's get out of here. I want to die on my feet."

Against the backcloth of that armored plain the old professor stood erect. He could see the glint of their fenders now. Ruth's hand squeezed his and he squeezed promptly back.

"I'm sorry," he said. Facing the bellow of those advancing klaxons he even managed a sarcastic smile across the concrete acerage out of whose Prussian night, along the reddened slopes of a new America, they were coming to kill him to the already audible chorus of one of the Postulant's personal hymns.

THE END

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(*Continued from page 4*)

Dear Editor:

Every last one of the stories in your July issue were ace and topnotch, as were the illos and that resplendent Emsh cover. I like weird stories and weird covers, which is one reason I was so pleased with the issue. The cover, especially that sky, was really inspiring.

J. G. Ballard is one of my favorite English writers. When reading a story by him I can always expect to find it fresh in style, original in plot, and very definitely always imaginative. Ballard's talent was more than obvious in his story "The Singing Statues" and the rather surprising ending held more meaning than many people might imagine. It was masterful the way he built up the idea of beauty in that woman, and then the way he tore it all down in a few short paragraphs by turning her into an image of a selfish child.

"The Thinking Disease" held a warning to mankind about the possible dangers of technology taking over humanity. "One Long Ribbon" was a beautiful story such as one might see on television but rarely read in book or magazine form. It too had something profound to say, here on the subject of time. Robert Young's story, "A Drink of Darkness," was a beautiful ordeal with a moral: Mistakes can be corrected—it's never too late.

It seems evident that science fiction is taking a new literary trend, or at least the science fiction short stories published in modern science fiction magazines are. This new type of short story seems to really have something to say to the reader—it's more than simple entertainment. Many times this message to the reader is at the end of the story, which leaves one to ponder and puzzle out a true meaning for himself. A point is good in the beginning of the story too, though there it might be crowded down and overridden by later events. Another qualification of this new type of story: It must be entertaining and readable as well as giving its point. This idea of giving the reader something to really think about will inevitably boost the outside critics' rating of science fiction too.

Bob Adolfsen
9 Prospect Ave.
Sea Cliff, N.Y.

● *The best stories don't set out to point a moral. The moral is implicit, and shows itself as a result of the writer's skill, and his concerns.*

Dear Editor:

My, but FANTASTIC has been publishing a lot of fantasy late-

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ly. I like the idea very much as long as you keep at least 25% of the stories sf.

I enjoyed the July issue tremendously except for the reprint which wasn't too hot. The cover was a gem! I hope to see more by Emsh soon. "Shield" was good but it was not Anderson at his best.

Arnold Katz
98 Patton Blvd.
New Hyde Park, N.Y.

● *My, but we're glad you're glad!*

Dear Editor:

I rarely read FANTASTIC; my favorite has always been AMAZING, but the illo on the August issue was so fabulous, I just had to buy it in spite of myself. My friends have been telling me that FANTASTIC is getting better by the minute, so I decided to try an issue. I was astounded with it.

First of all, the illo so well done by Vernon Kramer is an eye-catcher, very colorful indeed. I have seen better artwork, but I rarely see an illo on a prozine cover that is so downright attractive as this one.

Harris' "Sword of Flowers," which this cover illustrated, was disappointing. It was fairly interesting, but I fail to recognize the point (if any) the author was trying to make.

I have seen many talented artists pass through the pages of AMAZING, and FANTASTIC, but I have never been as displeased as with Summers' artwork on "Sword of Flowers" and "Behind the Door." He obviously has some kind of talent, but he just doesn't seem to fit into your pages well. There are so many other terrific artists that have been used in your magazines (Barr, Schelling, Schomburg, Finlay,) that it seems a shame to exploit Summers' work.

Well, Sharkey's story "Behind the Door," was, of course, fabulous, but I have come to expect nothing but the best from him. Being a lover of the macabre as well as of sf fantasy this tale of a vampire chilled me. The surprise ending was typical of Sharkey, and I enjoyed the story thoroughly.

Robert Young has done it again with "Victim of the Year." One of the most charming little witch tales, expressing the idea of black art as it affects today's society. Excellent.

"Titan" of course, was a classic and needs no further comment. Let's have more like this.

Except for "And A Tooth" the rest of the stories were all good.

David Keil
38 Slocum Crescent
Forest Hills 75, N.Y.

● *You'll want to read Shar-*

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key's fantasy novel featured in the November issue of FANTASTIC.

Dear Miss Goldsmith:

I thought you might like to hear of a side effect caused by your publishing one of my letters (the beginning of the "Bunch controversy").

Having read my letter in your magazine and noted that I mentioned taking reading material to our local library, and, as she said, liking the sound of my address (!), a very lovely lady in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, began sending me a couple of Canadian news magazines to which she and her friends subscribe and which she then gathers up and sends to various places in the States to be given to libraries, hospitals and shut-ins.

This wonderful "Good Neighbor," Mrs. Olive Allen, who has been ill and shut-in herself, is giving a great deal of pleasure to many people with her thoughtfulness and unselfishness. When I wrote and thanked her for the wealth of good reading that she sent in the first packages, I also asked her to tell me about Canada because my husband and I are interested in finding out all we can about other places, especially about ranch life. Being a city dweller, she had nothing, and subscribed to nothing about the country activities, so she wrote to each of the Provinces and asked that we be sent any available literature, whch is being done. This has included maps, official pamphlets and tourist guides and has been a wonderful source of information.

I still don't like the nauseous output of Mr. Bunch (could that, perhaps, be a "house" pseudonym?) and I don't think it equals the standard of most of the other stories you print, but perhaps you are getting them cheaper and have to use something trivial to fill up the allotted space and are going to be stubborn about it in spite of reader opinion. Or did you buy a group, sight unseen, and have to publish them to get your money's worth out of them? Oh, well! I don't have to read them. I just hate the space waste.

Thank you, anyway, for the unexpected windfall of *good* literature that has resulted from the fact that Mrs. Allen read my first letter to you.

Mrs. Alvin A. Stewart
Route 2, Box 64-A
San Saba, Texas

● *Bunch is a real name, and he gets regular rates, and we buy his stories one at a time* after *reading them, and we like some of them very much. So there.*

Dear Editor:

When I first saw the August issue it looked extremely prom-

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ising. The end result, however, was disappointing. The cover was unmentionable—you can do better than that! With such artists as Emsh, Finley, and Schomburg, you should be able to make surprising efforts in cover art.

The story was as bad as its cover illo—dull, uninteresting and almost pointless. As a "lead" story it hardly came up to the par of "The Singing Statues" or "Planet of Dread."

"The Titan" was marvelous. P. Schuyler Miller has once again proved his value to science fiction. Keep up the classic reprints. I'll be looking forward to your forthcoming ones.

Mr. Kafka is kindly invited to fade into the dust. What is fantasy—good, down to earth fantasy—but science fiction in disguise? How do you have one without the other?

Roger Cox
2913 Courtney Rd.
Augusta, Ga.

● *Fantasy is sf in disguise? Do I hear a riot approaching, or is that just the purists coming to get you?*

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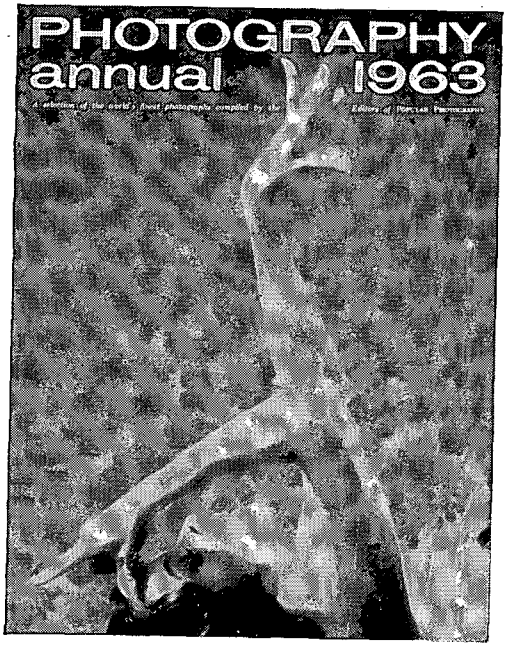

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